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ABSTRACT

In 1989, in response to declining enrollments and the smallest average school size in the nation, North Dakota legislation provided incentive payments to consortia of four or more school districts that voluntarily collaborated in program planning and implementation. Participating districts were required to vote on a reorganization proposal after 3 years of collaboration. By 1992-93, 24 consortia had formed, comprising 124 of North Dakota's 280 districts and over half of the state's rural students. This report examines the activities of consortia and the perceptions of state and local administrators, parents, teachers, and students. A review of consortia planning proposals and final reports provides details on enrollments and compares plans for and actual execution of curriculum and service enhancements, facilitating initiatives, and interim activities. A survey of 70 school board members and administrators in consortia and 70 not in consortia examined attitudes about the legislation, collaboration, incentive funding, reorganization, and alternative policy choices. Interviews with state and consortium administrators revealed their perceptions about the overall process of educational change in the state. A detailed case study of the Greater Nelson County consortium (seven northeastern districts) employed focus-group interviews with high school students, parents, and teachers. An afterword by Paul Nachtigal reflects on the "rules of the game," in which good choices belong only to large places (the industrial model of education), and suggests rules for a different game supporting a more organic, sustainable model for rural education. Contains 66 references and the text of the state legislation. (SV)

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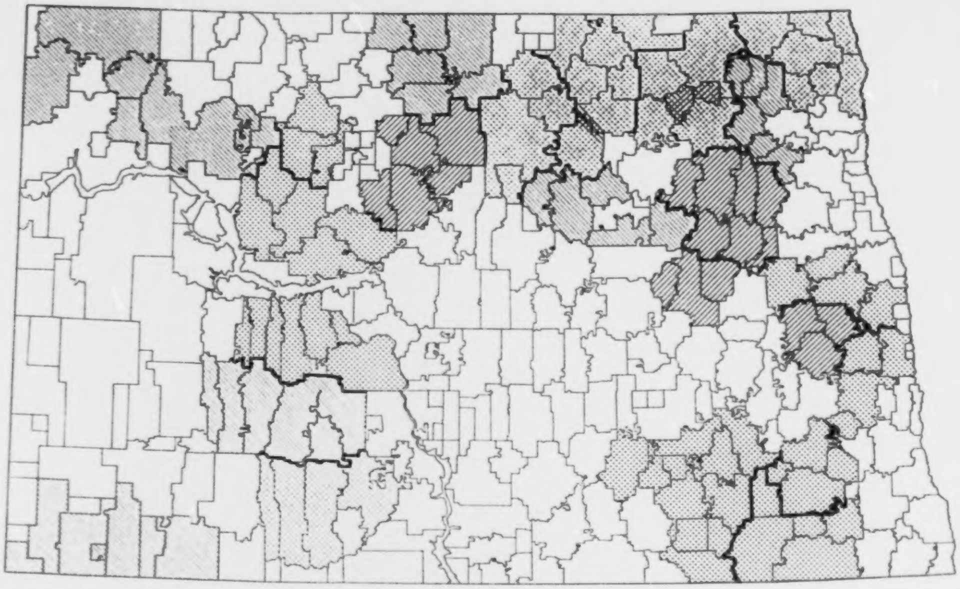
ALL THE GOOD CHOICES ARE TAKEN



A Study of Interdistrict Collaboration in North Dakota

By

Richard L. Hill and Pam R. Carlson

with an AFTERWORD by

Paul Nachtigal

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MARCH, 1994

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All the Good Choices Are Taken

A STUDY OF INTERDISTRICT COLLABORATION IN NORTH DAKOTA

by

Richard L. Hill and Pam R. Carlson

with an AFTERWORD by

Paul Nachtigal

in cooperation with the

Bureau of Educational Services and Applied Research

and printed by

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Grand Forks

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MARCH, 1994

FOREWORD

In the game of poker, players sometimes compete for a split pot. The high hand wins half the pot. The low hand wins half the pot. When the game is "high-low-declare," and after all bets are called, the last bettor declares high or low and then, in rotation, all other remaining players declare whether they intend to compete for the high half or the low half of the pot. If the first declarer announces "high" and the second announces "low," the third in line is almost obliged to observe, with attendant dark humor, "All the good choices are taken."

Dark humor seems appropriate for those responsible for conducting the affairs of small schools today. The potentials for generating more money or for securing more students appear remote. All the good choices are taken.

The alternative is to consider change. And it is not original to observe that one is likely to like change only if it's happening to someone else. In fact, many of us are pretty good at suggesting how others should change. More difficult is to consider--and promote--change for oneself.

School districts with small enrollments--and particularly where those enrollments are decreasing--must consider change. The alternatives are that their unit costs will increase or their programs and their quality will diminish or both. In an enrollment erosion circumstance, unit costs--per pupil costs--increase because fixed costs like heat for the building or the janitor's salary must be spread over fewer students. Because fewer students generate fewer dollars, administrators seeking to address the problem may eliminate a service or a staff member which has the effect of reducing the comprehensiveness of the program.

The forms of change urged on district officials include collaboration with other districts or reorganization with other districts. Both ideas have the same object--to create the critical mass of students necessary to assure efficiency, program comprehensiveness, and program quality.

Since 1989, North Dakota has pursued a very interesting initiative in school district collaboration. The purpose of this monograph is to tell that story.

The authors are not advocates for reorganization; neither are they opponents of reorganization. They do believe that, given the characteristics of North Dakota schools, cooperation between districts makes sense--economic sense and educational sense. If such cooperation leads to reorganization, so be it. They do recognize that both reorganization and collaboration require change. (The term "collaboration" as employed in this work connotes a more extensive and more formal joint effort than would the term "cooperation.")

The authors perceive that there is little enthusiasm for any kind of change in school district operation or governance in North Dakota among school officials or anyone else. Still, circumstances oblige officials to consider promoting and arranging change. But they do so with the sense that "all the good choices are taken."

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INTRODUCTION

In 1980 North Dakota had 653,000 inhabitants; in 1990 the population numbered 639,000 (Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1992, pp. 22, 27). The population in the state peaked at 681,000 in 1930 (Historical Statistics of the United States, 1975, p. 32). Population loss, then, has been a 60-year phenomenon. Moreover, there has been a parallel redistribution phenomenon within the state. Urban areas gained population; rural areas lost population. Farms became larger, families smaller, businesses and other services slipped away from rural communities. Conditions--better roads, rural electrification, mechanical marvels, grain and cattle prices--frequently conspired to exacerbate the trends. Projections suggest that the trends will continue.

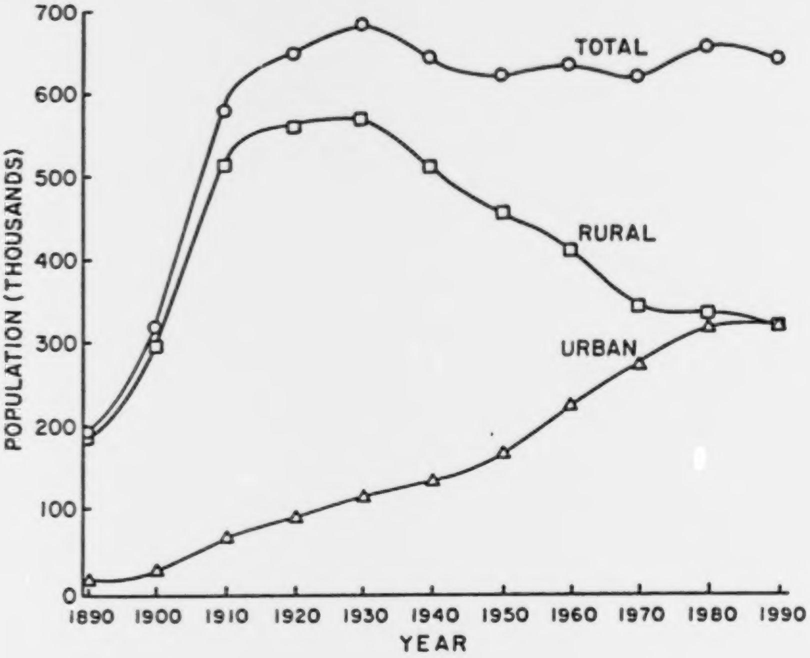

Figure 1. North Dakota population: 1890-1990

Rural schools, with modest enrollments in the first place, experienced enrollment erosion. Unit costs (per pupil costs) soared or programs contracted; often both occurred. Still, distance between locales and harsh weather conditions together with a general desire to "maintain our school" militated against the "solution" of reorganization into larger enrollment units, particularly if this meant congregating students at a single site.

Other "solutions"--broadly prepared teachers (capable of teaching in, say, three subject areas), technology (classes by interactive television, for instance), and curriculum innovation (eschewing a traditional course of study for some imagined alternative)--didn't work for a variety of reasons. Efforts to arrest, or even to reverse, the population trends (economic development efforts, subsistence farming ideas) haven't worked either except episodically and in a very few places.

At the very same time, the calls for educational "reform" were many and various. Expanded opportunity, greater rigor, and equal access were among the themes of this demand. Our capacity to compete as a nation, so the argument went, requires more and better. The smaller school often was poorly positioned to respond to the heightened demands. Although smaller enrollment schools can take justifiable pride in their manifest achievements--often against difficult odds--the calculus of all the variables affecting them sometimes produced despair. An enhanced accreditation standard or a new state mandate proved difficult to meet without new resources; new state resources were not forthcoming. (In North Dakota state revenues during the 1980s were essentially flat.) The property tax, the only alternative source available for local school boards, was unattractive. (In fact, property valuations, the base on which property taxes are generated, actually declined for most rural North Dakota districts during the 1980s.) The property tax was especially unattractive for "property poor" school districts (Bismarck Public School District #1, et al. v. State of North Dakota, et al., S.Ct. No. 930079).

The demographic realities were detailed in a recent publication for school administrators of the state ("Trends in ND," 1993, pp. 3-4). Here are the details:

North Dakota had 218,788 persons aged 0-19 in 1980 and 195,363 in that age group by 1990. Projections for 1995 suggested the range in this population would be between 171,485 and 179,624 and, for the year 2000, between 152,924 and 162,326. Thus, in the ten-year period 1990-2000, this population--including the "school age population"--was expected to shrink 17% if the most optimistic projection was employed.

Births per 1,000 women declined from 82 to 66 during the ten-year period 1980-1990; resident births declined from 12,407 (1981) to 8,888 (1991); children aged 0-5 declined from 61,281 to 49,365 between 1983 and 1991.

School enrollments in the 12 largest districts totaled 61,417 students in 1992-93 and were increasing; enrollments in the 265 rural districts totaled 56,482 and were declining. Fifteen schools enrolled 25 or fewer high school students in that year; 53 districts enrolled 26 to 50 high school students; 45 districts enrolled 51to 75 high school students; 27 districts enrolled 76 to 100 high school students; only 78 districts had high school enrollments exceeding 100 students.

The following table provides additional detail regarding North Dakota statistics together with a national ranking.

Table 1

North Dakota Statistics and National Rankings

	North Dakota (Number)	National Ranking
School enrollment	117,816	46
School districts	280	23
Schools per district	2.4	48
Square miles per district	248	25
Students per district	421	48
Students per school	174	50
Total staff/1000 students	119.9	15
Teachers/100 students	66.3	12
Expenditures/student	$3899	36

This then was the context for "1507," the "School District Boundary Restructuring" law which ushered in substantial--some would say frenetic--interdistrict collaborative activity. This publication is an attempt to record and assess some of that activity. Some background is presented first.

In 1988, Julian Bjornson, Superintendent of Schools at Grafton, and Larry Nudell, Superintendent of Schools at Harvey, proposed a radical restructuring of North Dakota school districts. Their plan envisioned reducing the 280 school districts (of four varieties) to 48 units. Governor George Sinner endorsed the idea and, during the 1989 session, legislators pondered the proposed ideas which were incorporated in draft legislation, "House Bill 1507" (Bjornson, 1993).

The initiative responded to the demographic and financial realities. Rural areas in North Dakota had experienced enrollment erosion over the past two decades, similar to a pattern experienced by rural areas in a broad band of states extending from the Canadian to the Mexican borders; authorities suspect this pattern is part of a continuing trend. Unit costs (per pupil costs) for education--and other public services--soared. Paradoxically, while costs increased, observers noted that comprehensiveness (and, many believe, quality of programs) suffered.

The legislative proposal, which promised administrative efficiencies, also imagined program enhancements through collaboration. Some advocates even believed the idea had potentials for cost containment and, if one happened to be an optimistic advocate, for cost reduction.

This "top-down" solution, however, garnered few converts among legislators and even fewer proponents. Still, the potentials intrigued legislators. Three legislators and a lobbyist conceived a "hog-house" amendment which removed virtually all language below the title of the draft and replaced it with a "bottom-up" substitution. Districts were challenged to join together voluntarily, to plan together, and to vote on a reorganization proposal three years after a period of voluntary collaboration concluded. Planning grants of up to $20,000 were made available, to be followed by incentive payments of from $125 to $165 per student. It was possible for a school to receive incentive payments for as many as five years, although the funds for the last two years were contingent upon a vote to reorganize the participating districts.

The legislation also provided for leadership and technical assistance for the effort. The North Dakota Department of Public Instruction (DPI) was assigned this role. Additionally, DPI administered the planning grants, approved "final reports" (the proposals developed subsequent to the planning grant activity), conducted mid-year assessments, provided forums for consortium actors, and accepted and approved continuation proposals.

Observers expected few "takers" (Sanstead, 1993). By the end of the first year, however, four consortia of three, three, seven, and seven districts had formed. Each secured a planning grant. In the next year, eight additional consortia embracing 43 districts were formed. In the third year, six additional consortia embracing 38 districts were formed. Moreover, five additional units embracing 25 districts were placed on a waiting list (Decker, 1993).

The state budget for planning grants and incentive payments jumped from a half million dollars for the 1989-91 biennium to six million dollars for the 1991-93 biennium. Projections for required amounts for the following two biennia were twelve million and twenty million dollars (Decker, 1993).

The 1993 legislature, however, balked at the growing cost. Instead legislators fashioned a phaseout of the law. Not all units eligible for incentive payments will receive them, nor will all units which did receive incentive payments receive them for the duration they had anticipated (Sanstead, 1993).

The consequences of this decision cannot be known at the date of this writing; clearly, there is some perception of bad faith, broken promises, or mixed signals when administrators and school board members in consortium schools evaluate the legislative choice. These same individuals, however, anticipate interdistrict collaboration to continue, though the nature and scope of collaboration are hard to predict.

The purpose of the present study, however, is not to speculate regarding the future; rather, the central purpose is to report the activity which occurred among North Dakota school districts which elected to consort during the years 1989-92. We do this by reporting how many districts availed themselves of the benefits promised by the law and opened themselves to the inevitable conflict attending the consideration of reorganization. We examine the content of the planning proposals which consortium districts developed. We also assess the fidelity of those proposals to performance by reviewing what actually occurred. We then report results of a survey completed by administrators and school board members from both in-consortium and not in-consortium schools. We compare and contrast perceptions regarding the rationale for the law, regarding the promise which collaboration holds, regarding assertions about the law itself, and regarding alternative policy choices. We follow this section by reporting perceptions of the actors, the individuals whom we interviewed. We review the law--really the three successive laws--and we provide the text of the laws in an Appendix. (Copies from the 1989, 1991, and 1993 supplements to the North Dakota Century Code are included.) We then report the findings of a qualitative study conducted in one consortium--a seven-district unit in which five of the districts decided to enter a reorganization and two of the districts did not. This section relies heavily on data collected in nine "focus group" interviews. Three groups of parents, three groups of students, and three groups of teachers were invited to share their perceptions and opinions.

We conclude with a discussion of our findings. We attempt to draw reasonable conclusions about the law, to make several generalizations about districts and district officials, and to discern some implications for policymakers. We also share some personal opinions formed during the conduct of the study.

The effort was supported by a grant from McREL, the Mid-continent Regional Education Laboratory. In addition to their financial support for study activity, the McREL staff provided helpful commentary regarding design and execution of the study. Paul Nachtigal, especially, mentored the writers. He and they, however, are not responsible for the content of this monograph and any errors that may be included.

The monograph contains an "afterword" by Paul Nachtigal. Nachtigal, who had firsthand experience with the law because of a requested involvement by the Heart of the Valley Consortium, nevertheless was able to view the activity from a more distant and, perhaps, a more objective perspective.

WHAT HAPPENED

After House Bill 1507, the School District Boundary Restructuring bill, became law, the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) convoked an advisory group to develop rules. Central to the rule-making activity was the task of determining eligibility for planning grants. How many districts, how much land area, how many students should be involved to establish a legitimate planning group?

The advisory committee suggested low thresholds in terms of numbers of districts, square miles of area, and numbers of students because members of the advisory panel judged that few units would be formed. They believed that the motivation to consider collaboration and possible future reorganization would be minimal and that few districts would choose to become involved (Sanstead, 1993). In order to qualify for a planning grant, groups of districts were obliged to meet the requirements contained in 67-05-02-01 of the Century Code:

> **Qualification.** In order to qualify as a consortium which may receive a planning grant pursuant to North Dakota Century Code chapter 15-27.6, the group of contiguous school districts must:
>
> 1. Consist of six school districts, four of which must operate K-12 or 1-12 programs;
> 2. Consist of four school districts each of which operate K-12 or 1-12 programs and enroll a minimum total of six hundred students;
> 3. Consist of four school districts each of which operate K-12 or 1-12 programs and encompass a total of at least seven hundred square miles; or
> 4. Consist of any group of school districts which substantially meets one of the foregoing criteria and which the department of public instruction determines is committed to studying and developing a plan to increase educational opportunities for students and to sharing school administrators and administrative services.

By the time of rule adoption, however, two units which "marginally met" the criteria had already been approved. In the 1991 legislation (Senate Bill 2034) the units already formed and in operation were explicitly "grandfathered in" even when they did not meet all of the criteria (Sanstead, 1993).

DPI hired a director for the program. As it happened they selected an individual--Thomas Decker--who exhibited uncommon zeal for the program (Sanstead, 1993). Decker logged "about 60,000" miles in the first three years of the program in order to inform--and to proseletyze--about the program. He had contact with patrons of 140 districts; often he had three or four meetings per week in widely separated geographic locations (Decker, 1993).

Applications trickled in. A three-district unit of about 450 students applied first, and their application for a planning grant was approved (Decker, 1993). The approval mechanism required that an application form be completed by administrators of the planning unit, that the application be approved by the constituent district school boards, that the program administrators receive and review and then recommend approval of the release of planning money to the unit, and that the State Board of Education approve the recommendation. The release of planning grant money obliged the unit to start a planning process which eventuated in a "final report"--really a proposal for collaborative interdistrict activity which qualified the unit for incentive funds. The planning activity was typically a consultant-assisted process. (Elsewhere in this study the role of the consultant is discussed.)

In the first year (1989-90), four units of three (Tri-District), three (Midkota), and seven (North Central), and seven (Greater Nelson County) districts applied for and were approved for planning grants. Each unit generated a final report. The units approved in the first year are identified in Figure 2.

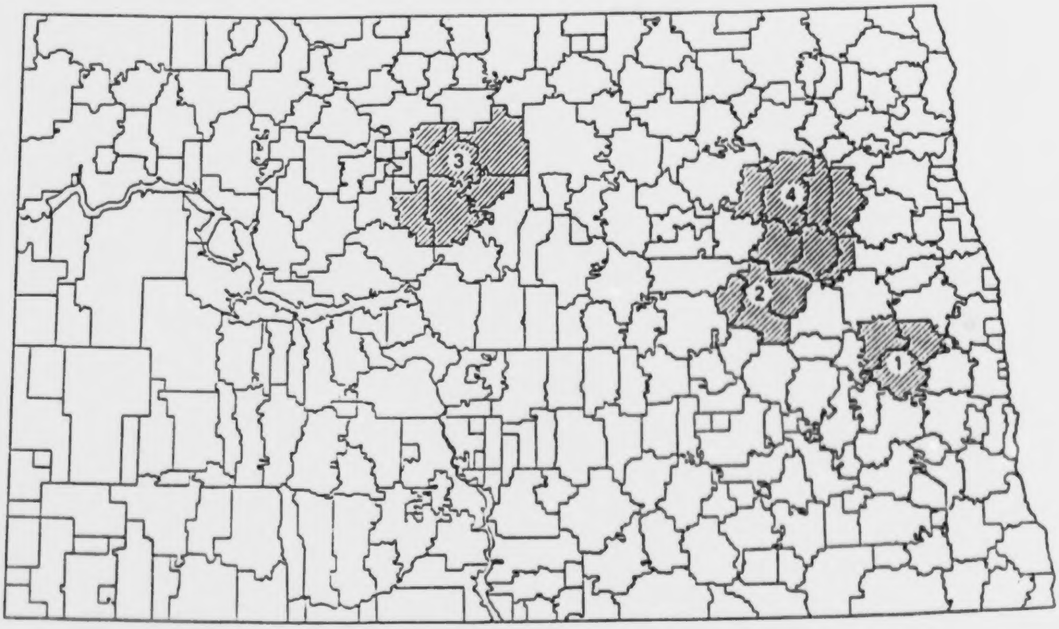

Figure 2. Consortia in North Dakota: 1990 Implementation Units

In Figure 2, the heavier line between units 2 and 4 marks the boundary between these two consortia. The lines within the consortium boundaries mark the boundaries of participating districts. Thus, in unit 4 for instance, one can discern that seven districts participated in the consortium.

In the second year, eight additional units were approved. These units contained three districts (Berthold/Carpio/United), five districts (Missouri Hills), five districts (Southeast Restructuring), four districts (Rural Cass), ten districts (New Horizons), seven districts (Oliver/Mercer), four districts (Heart of the Valley), and four districts (Ransom County). These units are identified in Figure 3.

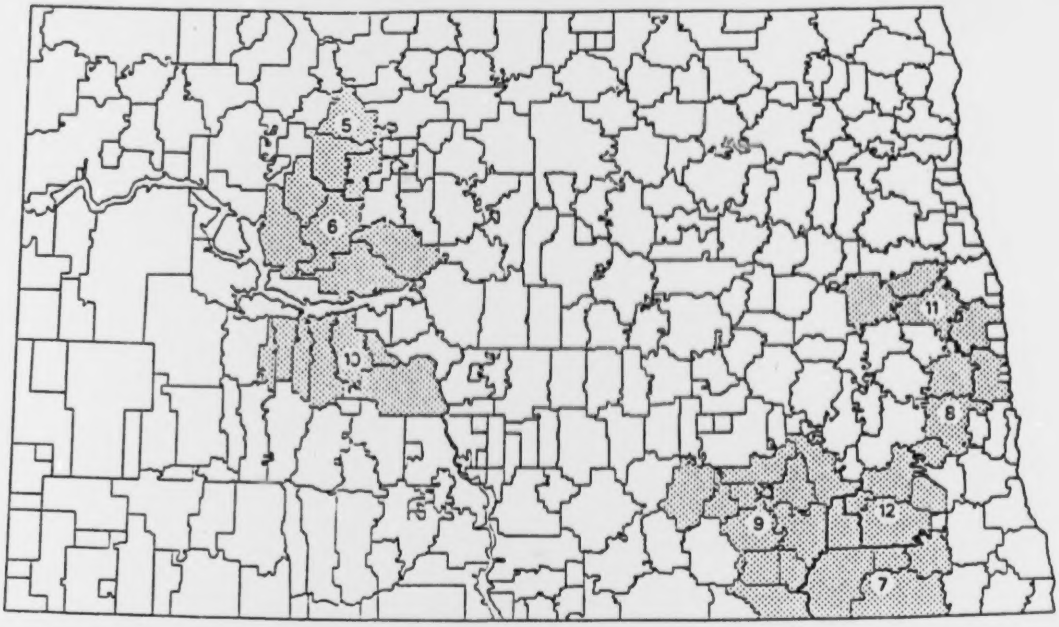

Figure 3. Consortia in North Dakota: 1991 Implementation Units

In the third and fourth years, six units formed and were approved. The third and fourth years must be considered together because in the 1991 law the growth of the program was slowed. The legislature wished to make incentive payments available only to those units approved during the first biennium (1989-91). The legislature did, however, provide capacity for some new units to secure planning grants. Planning occurred for some of the units during the 1991-92 school year and for others during the 1992-93 school year. These units contained six districts (Western Walsh), five districts (Benson County), six districts (West I-94), six districts (Yellowstone Trail), nine districts (Northwest Educational), and six districts (Bottineau County). These units are identified in Figure 4.

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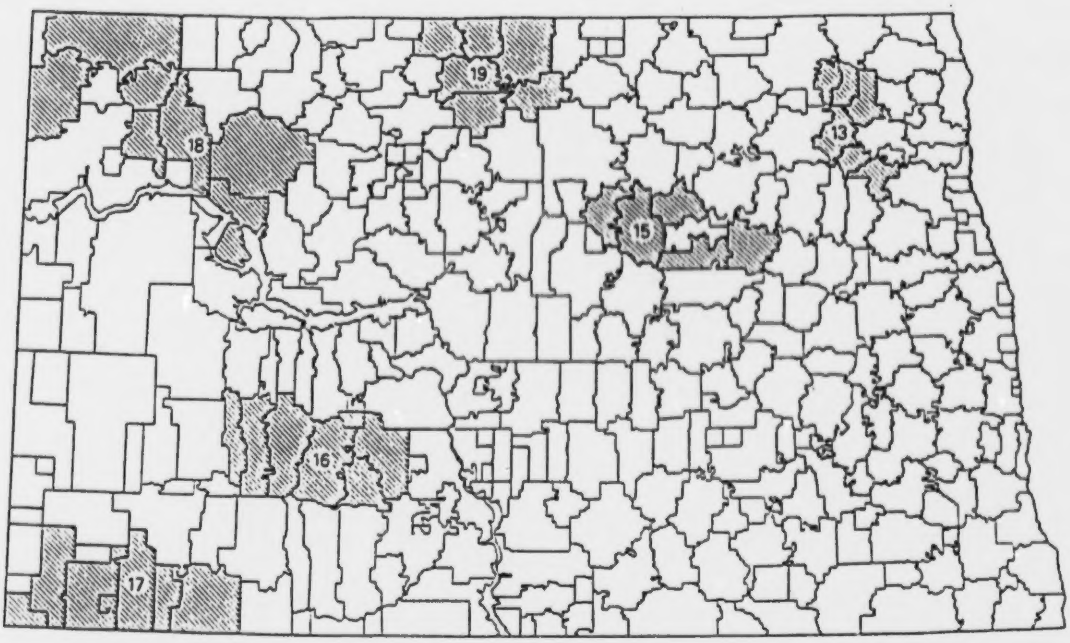

Figure 4. Consortia in North Dakota: 1992-93 Planning Grant Units

DPI exhausted their capacity to fund planning grants before all units which wanted to form could be supported. DPI created a "waiting list" of these units and encouraged some initial unsupported activity. These units contained six districts (Pembina County), six districts (Durum Circle), five districts (Great Northern), four districts (Pierce-Rolette), and four districts (Highway 21). These "waiting list" units are identified in Figure 5. (Some of these units arranged substantial collaborative discussion though they did not proceed to the point of developing a final report.)

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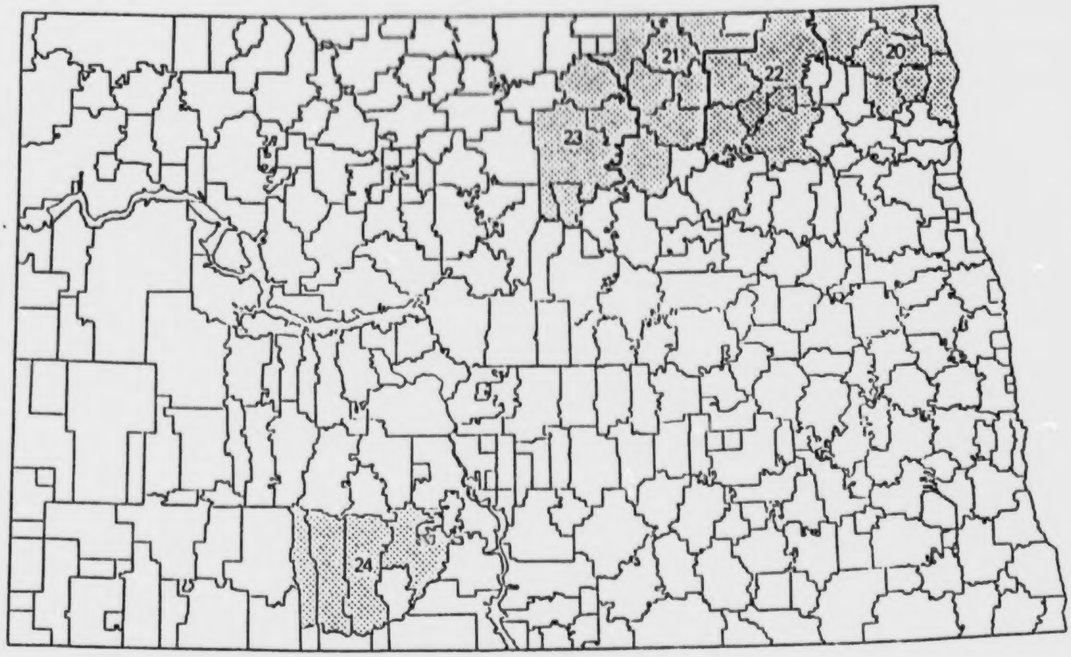
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22
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Figure 5. Consortia in North Dakota: "Waiting List"

Figure 6 identifies all the units which went at least as far as applying for a planning grant. Also, these units, at the date of this writing, were continuing to consort in some manner or had made a formal decision by voting to discontinue.

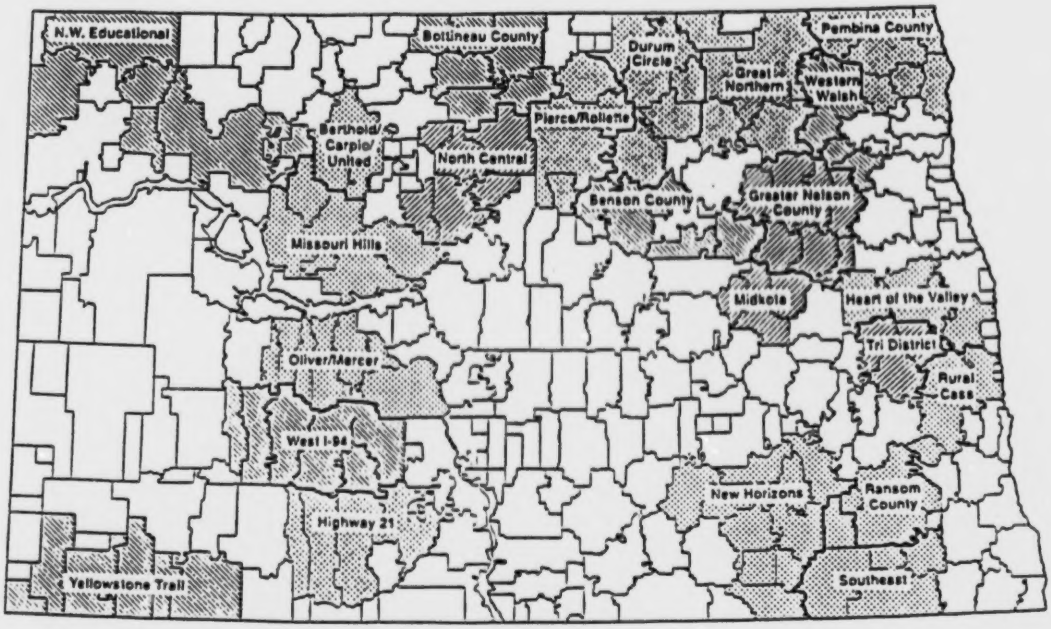
N.W. Educational
Bottineau County
Durum Circle
Pembina County
Great Northern
Western Walsh
Berthold/Carpio/United
Pierce/Rollette
North Central
Benson County
Greater Nelson County
Missouri Hills
Midkota
Heart of the Valley
Tri District
Oliver/Mercer
Rural Cass
West I-94
New Horizons
Ransom County
Highway 21
Southeast
Yellowstone Trail

Figure 6. Consortia in North Dakota: 1990-1993

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In Table 2 the data reported about the units come from the School District Boundary Restructuring Directory (1992-1993). The reader may note some discrepancy between information reported here and that reported elsewhere. For instance, the North Central Consortium is here reported as a six-district unit while earlier reference was made to a seven-district unit. This is because one district dropped out of the consortium in the second year of operation. Similarly, other units experienced dropouts, units accepted additional districts, units changed names, and units subdivided--that is, one planning unit became two planning units. Note also that number 14 is absent. Fourteen was the number assigned to the Lonetree Consortium which, during the planning process, decided not to generate a final report. They determined that they were not a logical group of districts and that they were "being too nice" by avoiding the topic of school closings (Sylling, 1993).

Table 2

Consortium Units in 1992-93

Number	Unit Name	Number of Districts	Number of Students	Number of Square Miles
1	Tri-District	3	424	625
2	Midkota	3	268	604
3	North Central	6	1112	1398
4	Greater Nelson County	7	945	1432
5	Berthold/Carpio/United	3	910	729
6	Missouri Hills	5	1255	1671
7	Southeast Restructuring	5	1534	1381
8	Rural Cass	4	1122	810
9	New Horizons	10	1839	2422
10	Oliver/Mercer	7	2849	1524
11	Heart of the Valley	4	1618	1006
12	Ransom County	4	1220	839
13	Western Walsh	6	544	729
15	Benson County	5	736	1159
16	West I-94	6	1280	1907
17	Yellowstone Trail	6	1363	2326
18	Northwest Educational	9	2985	4353
19	Bottineau County	6	1450	1729
20	Pembina County	6	1660	1047
21	Durum Circle	6	1265	1504
22	Great Northern	5	1184	1887
23	Pierce-Rolette	4	1125	1286
24	Highway 21	4	806	1597
Totals		124*	29,494	33,965

*Totals will vary slightly from numbers reported elsewhere; for instance, Surrey left North Central after the first year and Salund left Ransom County during the planning process. Thus, all totals must be regarded as approximate and representative of a point in time.

The 33,965 square miles represent just under one-half the area of the state (48%); the 29,494 students represent one-quarter of the students in the state. If the "urban students," those enrolled in the 14 districts which had more than 100 students per grade level, were removed from the calculation, the 29,494 students represent 55% of the "rural students" in the state (North Dakota Educational Directory, 1992-1993).

The first four units were "implemented" in 1990, which meant that 1990-91 was the first year of their incentive funding; the next eight units began a year later. The remaining units, which had later implementation dates, did not and will not receive incentive payments. (The 1991 legislation slowed down possible implementation dates by accepting new proposals during the 1992 and 1993 years but, at the same time, indicating that incentive funds would not be available until after 1993.) Of this group, six units prepared formal proposals (final reports) and were "approved" for incentive payments. The other five units were somewhere in the initial planning phase when the rules changed dramatically. The 1993 legislature did provide a phaseout incentive payment for units which had received payments and a modest pool of money ($200,000 across all eligible units) to maintain collaborative initiatives. Units which were not receiving incentive payments were invited to propose activity to maintain the thrust (Decker, 1993; Sanstead, 1993).

CONTENT OF PLANS; FIDELITY TO PLANS

Planning grants of up to $20,000 were awarded to a group of districts which applied for the grant, which committed themselves to plan together, and which met the eligibility criteria. Plans were to result in a "final report," which served as a proposal for incentive payments. The final reports were examined by outside readers employed by DPI and by inside readers at DPI (Decker, 1993). This examination determined whether or not the final reports met the dictates of the law, especially inclusion and analysis of certain data. Appropriate planning and commitment were to be discerned from the report.

The purpose of this section is to report the content of consortia plans. This task was accomplished by examining the 15 final reports approved by the time of this writing (12 units which received incentive payments and three units, Benson County, Western Walsh, and Yellowstone Trail, which were approved in 1992).

A second purpose is to report the fidelity of performance to plans. Did the consortia actually do what their officials said they were going to do? This purpose was accomplished by examining "mid-year assessments" of the approved units. In January and February of 1991 and 1992, these formal assessments occurred. DPI officials and consultants conducted site visits; they reviewed minutes, reports, publications, continuing plans, and financial data; they interviewed administrators, teachers, and interim board members; and they wrote the assessments. Two such assessments existed for each of four consortia approved in 1990 and one assessment existed for the eight consortia approved in 1991. These 16 documents were examined for the tabular and narrative information which appears in this section.

The mid-year site visit practice was abandoned in 1993. The press of a legislative session and the volume of work for program administrators suggested that course of action. Written progress reports were substituted for the more formal site assessments (Decker, 1993).

In the following table, the consortia whose final reports and mid-year assessments were examined are listed together with certain additional information. Student enrollments and projections for the years 1985-1995 are included in five-year intervals. In a few instances the data for the target year were unavailable and data for another year were substituted and noted. Also, the mid-year assessments examined are detailed.

Table 3

Final Reports Examined with Approved Year, Enrollments, Projections, and Mid-year Assessments Examined

Approval Year	Consortium	1985-86 Enrollment	1990-91 Enrollment	1995-96 Projected Enrollment	1991 Assess	1992 Assess
1990	Greater Nelson County	1076	993	970	Yes	Yes
1990	Midkota	356	348	312	Yes	Yes
1990	North Central (includes enrollments from one district which left the consortium)	1731	1536	1334 (94-95)	Yes	Yes
1990	Tri-District	454 (86-87)	438	385	Yes	Yes
1991	Berthold/Carpio/United	1020	916	821 (94-95)	No	Yes
1991	Heart of the Valley	1335	1294	1221	No	Yes
1991	Missouri Hills	1453	1256	1056 (94-95)	No	Yes
1991	New Horizons	1909	1773	1634	No	Yes
1991	Oliver/Mercer	2837 (86-87)	2756	2516	No	Yes
1991	Ransom County	1286	1305	1134	No	Yes
1991	Rural Cass	1140	1114	1023	No	Yes
1991	Southeast	1805	1548	1325	No	Yes
1992	Benson County	871 (86-87)	831	743	No	No
1992	Western Walsh (includes enrollments from two districts which left the consortium)	1207	1113	996	No	No
1992	Yellowstone Trail	1623	1449	1184	No	No

The pattern of enrollment erosion is apparent from the data presented. In one instance, Ransom County, an inconsistent trend was discerned. The unit had more students in 1990 than in 1985; however, projections suggested eventual erosion. The rate of erosion varies. Although all of the trend data are down for 1995-96, the projections for several units, North Central, Missouri Hills, Southeast, and Yellowstone Trail might be better described as dramatically down.

In the next three tables, the initiatives planned by the 15 consortia are reported. The first of these tables (Table 4) reports the program and service enhancements the consortia members planned for using the incentive money available to them. The second table (Table 5) reports the studies and facilitating activities consortia members planned. The third table (Table 6) details interim board activities. These data came from the final reports.

Did the plans approved get carried out? To assess the level of fidelity of plans to performance, we read those mid-year assessments occurring during the first year of consortia operation. We made a judgment regarding whether the separate initiatives were (a) executed as planned, (b) modified significantly but addressed, or (c) abandoned or postponed. These judgments, of course, are fallible or at least arguable. We had some difficulty in interpreting whether we should judge an effort as executed as planned or addressed as modified. Further, some of the plans aggregated several initiatives into a bundle and costed the entire bundle; some of the mid-year assessments were not entirely consistent when disaggregating these bundles. Thus, the judgments regarding fidelity must be read with these caveats in mind. Nevertheless, while the judgments are clearly interpretations, they do give some sense of fidelity of plans to performance. (Note that only data from 12 consortia are reported in the tables because data from mid-year assessments were included in the tables and no mid-year assessments existed for the last three consortia.)

Table 4

Program and Service Enhancements Planned across Consortia

Initiative	Rptd	Exec	Modi	Aban
Offer/expand modern foreign language	11	8	2	1
Expand art curriculum	9	5	1	3
Add vocational programs	2	1	1	0
Provide advanced mathematics courses	2	1	0	1
Provide advanced science courses	2	1	0	1
Provide business education elective	1	1	0	0
Provide basic skills program	2	2	0	0
Provide parity in music programs	1	0	0	1
Provide adult education program	1	0	0	1
Expand counseling service	11	6	4	1
Improve library service*	8	2	3	3
Arrange a technology improvement*	7	1	3	3
Start a gifted and talented program	8	4	1	3
Provide computers/achieve parity in software**	7	2	3	2
Catalog and share music scores	3	1	1	1
Expand sports co-oping	1	0	0	1
Develop interactive television***	3	2	0	1

Rptd = Number of consortia reporting this initiative; Exec = Executed as planned; Modi = Modified but addressed; Aban = Abandoned or postponed.

*For some initiatives, library and technology related, for instance, quite different scopes in projects obtained--from modest sharing to very complex initiatives. They involved quite different costs. In the instances of complex plans, the objectives were frequently modified.

**A wide range of initiatives under the general rubric "computers" existed; further, "computers" are mentioned again when we examined "studies to be conducted."

***In several instances, more was achieved than was planned. In one consortium, so much progress was made on the development of the ITV capability that they chose to postpone several programs initiatives until they could use ITV as the medium for delivery.

The consortia generated many program and service enhancements. The most popular initiatives related to counseling services, modern foreign language courses, art programs, library initiatives, gifted and talented programs, computer initiatives, and technology improvements.

A second set of initiatives were labeled "facilitating initiatives." Almost all consortia used incentive monies to start staff development and curriculum improvement (or curriculum rationalization or curriculum parity) processes. These facilitating initiatives varied from focused (improve reading instruction knowledge) to very general, from modest in cost and aspiration to expansive in cost and concept, and from short-term (one year) to long-term (several years). Many "studies" or "sharing activities" were planned. Many of these initiatives imagined broad advisory participation wherein parents and teachers and, sometimes, students were to become involved. Such involvement was encouraged by the statute and by a contemporaneous statute which mandated broad participation in North Dakota schools. While the initiatives can be named--as they are in Table 5--the nature, scope, and variety of the initiatives cannot be captured adequately. Also, because many of the initiatives are really processes, judgments regarding whether they were executed as planned proved more slippery than was the case in the foregoing exercise.

Table 5

Facilitating Initiatives Planned across Twelve Consortia

Initiative	Rptd	Exec	Modi	Aban
Expand staff development efforts	11	8	2	1
Initiate a curriculum development process	12	6	4	2
Initiate a supervision improvement process	3	1	2	0
Provide open enrollment options	4	0	2	2
Develop advisory core for committee work*	5	1	2	2
Include reorganization policy in the curriculum	1	0	1	0
Initiate supporting studies or activities**				
Financial studies	2	0	2	0
Facilities studies	7	2	1	4
Transportation studies	8	1	2	5
Contract studies	8	2	3	3
Group purchasing	3	1	1	1
Group accounting	2	0	1	1
Group printing	2	0	0	2
Administrative restructuring	4	1	1	2
Policy study	3	0	1	2
Personnel study	3	0	2	1
Enrollment study	1	0	0	1
Reorganization planning	2	0	2	0
ITV study	2	0	2	0
Other studies for possible pooling or sharing (reference books, custodial equipment, texts, music scores)	6	0	3	3

Rptd = Number of consortia reporting this initiative; Exec = Executed as planned; Modi = Modified but addressed; Aban = Abandoned or postponed.

*Several final reports mentioned developing advisory groups explicitly; in other reports, this particular initiative was implicit in staff development and curriculum improvement efforts.

**The studies planned were often reported as "premature" during the mid-year assessments; quite often there remained the intention to get to that activity sooner or later.

In addition to the almost universal decision to commence curriculum and staff development activities, all units committed themselves to studies and sharing activities. The most frequent studies related to contracts, facilities, and transportation.

Some of the units undertook efforts of considerable scope and complexity. Several of the initiatives planned, particularly in curriculum development, were to be consultant-assisted efforts. Many of the units employed the staff development initiative to convoke all certificated personnel for efforts which, not incidentally, were employed to share information about the broader consortium initiatives.

A third variety of initiative related to the activities of the interim board itself. The School District Boundary Restructuring statute stipulated that to govern a consortium at least one school board member from each constituent district should form an "interim board" similar to the school board and should operate similarly to a school board. Frequently a single school board member from each constituent school board was involved in the planning process. Another frequent pattern was for each school board to designate a member and an alternate for the planning process. The law required that the formation and operation of this interim board were to be detailed in final reports. Similar to the patterns of board participation in the planning effort, the final reports detailed both single member and member plus alternate schemes for interim board operation. Table 6 reports initiatives related to this planning for the governance of the consortia.

Table 6

Interim Board Activities Planned across Twelve Consortia

Initiative	Rptd	Exec	Modi	Aban
Secure coordinator(s)	10	5	5	0
Secure business manager	12	10	1	1
Secure secretarial assistance	3	2	1	0
Budget for board expenses	11	10	1	0
Budget for board compensation	7	6	0	1
Congregate students differently	1	0	1	0
Purchase FAX machines	2	1	0	1
Provide a shared business manager for all consortium districts	1	0	0	1
Provide "fellowships"	3	0	0	3
Conduct public information efforts*	18	10	6	2

Rptd = Number of consortia reporting this initiative; Exec = Executed as planned; Modi = Modified but addressed; Aban = Abandoned or postponed.

*Several units planned and budgeted for several distinct public information initiatives. The most frequent forms for the public information efforts were quarterly newsletters to all patrons, public meetings, rotating interim board meetings among constituent district sites, and providing information to local news media.

We examined final reports from another three consortia, Benson County, Western Walsh, and Yellowstone Trail. These were the units approved in 1992 and for which no mid-year assessments were available. An analysis revealed plans similar to those of the other units. Two of the units planned more extensive curriculum development efforts than was typical, and two of the units had proposed studies which had not been encountered in earlier final reports. Still, most of the initiatives proposed were very much like those encountered in the reports for the other 12 units.

In general, the initiatives planned were the initiatives executed. Sometimes the original plan was modified, and a different, but related, effort actually occurred. Occasionally a planned initiative was abandoned or postponed. The mid-year assessments revealed that some initiatives were postponed, frequently because they were perceived by practitioners as being premature--desirable but desirable later. Some initiatives were quite simply abandoned. Practitioners could not or did not get to them and sometimes indicated that these were less important initiatives. In no instance did assessors report inappropriate use of incentive money; that is, in no instance were funds being used for purposes different from those planned. In many instances more was promised than was achieved; in a few instances more was achieved than was planned. Overall, we judged there existed reasonable fidelity between plans and performance.

A couple of planned initiatives deserve special comment. In three of the units "fellowships" for present staff members were to be commenced if qualified personnel could not be secured for counseling or for gifted and talented positions. Because qualified personnel were secured, these initiatives were not activated. We thought, however, the idea was creative. In one unit a plan to teach about the consortium initiative was planned. This was not to be an effort in advocacy but, rather, the study of a difficult policy question by students affected by the policy choice. That initiative was addressed but not in the manner originally planned.

Second-year assessments were available for four consortia: Greater Nelson County, Midkota, North Central, and Tri-District. In these instances, the assessments addressed plans ("Annual Plans") submitted by the consortium coordinator(s) and approved by the interim board. These plans were required to continue receiving incentive payments.

These annual plans were more focused than were the original proposals. Fewer new initiatives were promised. Plans built on initial achievements (e.g., expand sharing, secure consultant for curriculum effort, employ an architect, develop a consortium tech-prep grant, determine how to share buses and riders). The second mid-year assessments for these four consortia reflected recognition that the efforts planned were the efforts performed. In a phrase, after the first year of operation, there was an increase in fidelity between plans and performance.

This is not to suggest that everything was going well for the units. One unit, for instance, lost the counselors and modern foreign language teachers they had hired in the previous year; at the same time they were able to expand their art initiative and document how valued that initiative was viewed by parents and teachers (Gegelman, 1993). We do conclude, however, that fidelity of plans to performance, good in the first year of operation, improved in the second year of operation.

RESULTS OF A SURVEY

We constructed an instrument and conducted a survey to compare and contrast perceptions of officials--administrators and school board members--in and not in consortium units. Because the education community itself had become divided regarding the law, we judged that perceptions from the two groups should be secured.

The instrument was developed by the writers, modified after consultation with several individuals, and mailed in March of 1993. The legislature was then in session, and the outcome of the debate surrounding the School District Boundary Restructuring law was not known to respondents.

A convenience sample was drawn for 35 administrators in consortium schools, 35 board members in consortium units, 35 administrators not in consortium schools, and 35 school board members not in consortium schools. The sample was constructed so that every consortium which had been formed was included; the not in-consortium sample was constructed to assure wide geographic distribution of respondents.

More than two-thirds (69.3%) of the instruments were returned in time to be included in the analysis. This section reports the analysis--statistical and tabular--which occurred with these responses.

The n in this study was small ($n = 48$ school board members and administrators in consortium schools and $n = 49$ board members and administrators not in consortium schools). The decision was made to collapse the categories "definitely agree" and "agree to some extent" into a single "agree" category. Similarly, "definitely disagree" and "disagree to some extent" were collapsed into a single "disagree" category. This permitted conducting a series of Chi square analyses of 2x2 tables. This decision was even more appropriate when in subsequent analyses specific roles were analyzed--for instance, school board members in consortium schools against school board members not in consortium schools.

Reported below are the instrument statements together with Chi square values and significance levels. Those statements wherein significant differences between in-consortium and not in-consortium respondents were discerned are marked by an asterisk. (The .05 probability level was selected to assign a "statistically significant difference.") After some discussion of these findings, additional analyses are presented.

The first set of statements, reported in Table 7, related to the rationale for the policy--the law. The respondents were introduced to the series of statements by this explanation: "A multi-faceted rationale was provided for considering the law. Not everyone agreed with all elements of that rationale. You are asked to indicate, on the scale to the right, your level of agreement with the statements." The statement, the Pearson value, and the level of significance are provided.

Table 7

Assessments regarding the Rationale for the Policy--the Law

	Pearson Value	Significance
The nature of the world (global competition, technological innovation, required quality in the workforce) argues for sustained efforts to improve education.	NA	NA
(no respondent disagreed with this statement)		
The nature of the state (small enrollment schools, demographics--especially enrollment erosion, economic realities) argues for sustained efforts to improve efficiency in the delivery of school services.	4.17	.041*
The future suggests that our students must be academically and technologically literate; that they must possess critical thinking skills and self-esteem; that they must be well grounded in the "basics"; in short, our students need to be better prepared in the future than was true in the past.	2.00	.157
The North Dakota education system, taken as a whole, has too many administrators--superintendents, principals, and business managers.	.49	.482
Small enrollment schools have great difficulty in assuring appropriate variety in school programs (e.g., offering modern foreign languages, art, vocational programs).	6.04	.014*
Small enrollment schools have great difficulty in assuring appropriate depth in school programs (e.g., advanced science, advanced math).	4.38	.036*
Small enrollment schools have great difficulty in assuring a proper mix and quality of services for students (e.g., counseling, library, gifted and talented programs).	4.69	.030*
Small enrollment schools have great difficulty in assuring appropriate competition in courses.	9.44	.002*

Table 7--Continued

	Pearson Value	Significance
The problems for small enrollment schools are much greater at the secondary level than at the elementary level.	.44	.510
Technology (e.g., interactive TV, library networks) could solve most of the problems we encounter regarding variety and depth.	2.97	.085

In five of the ten instances, the in-consortium group agreed with the statements, with significantly greater frequency than the not in-consortium group. These findings are all in the direction one would expect: the in-consortium group evidenced more approbation for the rationale statements than do those not in a consortium group.

The second set of statements, reported in Table 8, related to the potential which collaboration was perceived to hold. The respondents were introduced to the series of statements by this explanation: "In adopting the consortium law, there was the hope that collaboration--even voluntary reorganization--had some potentials legislators desired. You are asked to indicate on the scale to the right how you view those potentials." The statement, the Pearson value, and the level of significance are provided.

Table 8

Assessments regarding the Promise That Collaboration Holds

	Pearson Value	Significance
Collaboration between and among school districts (whether or not they eventually reorganize) holds considerable potential for schools to improve their variety of offerings.	2.67	.102
Collaboration between and among school districts (whether or not they eventually reorganize) holds considerable potential for schools to improve their depth of offerings.	1.77	.183
Collaboration between and among school districts (whether or not they eventually reorganize) holds considerable potential for schools to improve the number and variety of their services.	2.97	.085

Table 8--Continued

	Pearson Value	Significance
Collaboration between and among school districts (whether or not they eventually reorganize) holds considerable potential for schools to improve their efficiencies and control their costs (that is, they could do more with the same number of dollars).	12.06	.001*
Collaboration between and among school districts (whether or not they eventually reorganize) holds considerable potential for schools to improve equity in programs (that is, more students would have more programs and services available).	5.69	.017*
The manner in which the law was constructed permits smaller enrollment schools to negotiate with larger enrollment schools on a more even basis than otherwise would be the case.	18.64	.001*

All respondents perceived positive potentials in interdistrict collaboration. The in-consortium group, however, agreed with significantly greater frequency with the statements in three of the six instances than did the not in-consortium group. Again the findings were in the direction one would expect.

The most consistent differences and the most highly significant differences between the in-consortium group and the not in-consortium group occurred when respondents were queried about assertions regarding the law. The respondents were introduced to the third set of statements by this explanation: "Different actors in the policy debate surrounding the law have stated judgments or opinions about the law. You are asked to indicate on the scale to the right of the following statements to what degree you agree with the statements."

Table 9

Assessments regarding Assertions about the Policy--the Law

	Pearson Value	Significance
The districts which have entered a consortium are just in it for the money.	32.78	.001*
The incentive program was really intended for smaller enrollment schools than many of those which entered the program.	16.91	.001*
The money which supported this program should have gone to general foundation support since that is of higher priority.	45.77	.001*
An incentive program like this should only have been considered in the context of adequate state support for existing programs (the foundation program, the special education program, the vocational program).	20.69	.001*

The in-consortium group tended to disagree with all of these statements; the not in-consortium group tended to agree with all of the statements. These findings were again in the direction one would expect.

The final series of statements to which all respondents replied related to alternative policy choices. Respondents were introduced to these statements with the explanation: "Some have suggested that alternative policy choices should be considered; whether you favor the present law or not, indicate your assessment of these alternatives." The statements, the Pearson value, and the level of significance are provided in Table 10.

Table 10

Assessments regarding Alternative Policy Choices

	Pearson Value	Significance
If a district has a high school enrollment which falls below some established number (as 35 students), the district should be forced to annex to another district within three years.	3.55	.059
A small enrollment district (again below 35 students in high school) should be forced to reorganize only if it is 15 miles or less from another high school.	.70	.404
Support for all high school students should be identical (the index system should be abandoned), thereby reducing an argument that the current system provides an incentive for remaining inefficient.	.49	.482
All schools below a certain size should be required to plan for a time when supports would be leveled (the index system would be modified or abandoned).	2.07	.150
Those schools which accept an incentive payment should have foundation payments reduced if they fail to reorganize (that is, provide both a carrot and a stick; demand serious consideration of consequences of entering a consortium).	40.06	.001*
The state should abandon the consortium effort; take no role; let things happen naturally as dictated by economics and enrollments.	28.98	.001*
The state should take a role--encouraging or demanding reorganization--but it should be structured differently than the School District Boundary Restructuring law.	.95	.330

Only when the alternative policy choice statements related specifically to policies concerning consortiums could differences between the in-consortium group and the not in-consortium group be discerned. In these instances, not surprisingly, the opinions differed in a highly significant manner.

The finding that on non-consortium related matters there did not exist patterns of discernible direction or agreement would suggest scant comfort for policymakers concerned with these questions. Said obliquely, no policy would have broad approbation or support.

When the responses from the two sets of school board members were analyzed the results were found to parallel the general analysis with two exceptions. These exceptions are reported in Table 11.

Table 11

School Board Members in Consortium Schools Analyzed against School Board Members Not in Consortium Schools

	Pearson Value	Significance
Collaboration between and among school districts (whether or not they eventually reorganize) holds considerable potential for schools to improve equity in programs (that is, more students would have more programs and services available.)	1.21	.272
The manner in which the law was constructed permits smaller enrollment schools to negotiate with larger enrollment schools on a more even basis than otherwise would be the case.	3.21	.073

The sets of school board members were not statistically significantly different from each other, although the groups (administrators and school board members) had been.

When the responses from the two sets of administrators were analyzed, the results were found to parallel the general analysis with four very interesting exceptions. On four of the statements relating to the rationale for the law, where the groups (board and administrator in and not in consortiums) were found to be different when the two sets (only administrators in and not in a consortium) were analyzed, the differences did not hold. Results of this analysis are presented in Table 12.

Table 12

Administrators in a Consortium Analyzed against Administrators Not in a Consortium

	Pearson Value	Significance
Small enrollment schools have great difficulty in assuring appropriate variety in school programs (e.g., offering modern foreign languages, art, vocational programs).	1.07	.301
Small enrollment schools have great difficulty in assuring appropriate depth in school programs (e.g., advanced science, advanced math).	.36	.550
Small enrollment schools have great difficulty in assuring a proper mix and quality of services for students (e.g., counseling, library, gifted and talented programs).	.21	.643
Small enrollment schools have great difficulty in assuring appropriate competition in courses.	1.84	.175

Again, where statistically significant differences for the four statements were discerned when the groups were analyzed, the difference was not apparent when the responses from the two sets of administrators were analyzed. There may be many plausible explanations for this finding, but one which may have some plausible practical significance is that board members are not so much aware of the rationale for collaborative activity until after they enter collaborative activity.

When the responses from the set of school board members in a consortium were analyzed against the set of administrators in a consortium, only two instances of statistically significant differences were discerned. One instance was predictable. The other deserves a bit of commentary. (It should be noted further that in only two other instances was there a finding that approached significance. Thus, there was general accord between board members and administrators in consortiums.) Results of this analysis are presented in Table 13.

Table 13

School Board Members in a Consortium Analyzed against Administrators in a Consortium

	Pearson Value	Significance
The North Dakota education system, taken as a whole, has too many administrators--superintendents, principals, and business managers.	11.75	.001*
The state should abandon the consortium effort; take no role; let things happen naturally as dictated by economics and enrollments.	7.31	.007*

There was disagreement regarding the number of administrators--board members agreeing, administrators disagreeing with the statement. In the second instance, while both board members and administrators tended to disagree, the board members were much more vehement in their position. With very few exceptions, they believed the state should maintain the consortium effort.

In general, the sets of school board members not in a consortium and administrators not in a consortium evidenced accord in their responses to the statements. In only two instances were there statistically significant differences discerned when this analysis was conducted. (Similar to the findings in the prior analysis, there were only a couple instances where one could assign an "approaching significance" level.) The statements where differences were found are reported in Table 14.

Table 14

School Board Members Not in a Consortium Analyzed against Administrators Not in a Consortium

	Pearson Value	Significance
The North Dakota education system, taken as a whole, has too many administrators--superintendents, principals, and business managers.	4.41	.036*
Small enrollment schools have great difficulty in assuring a proper mix and quality of service for students (e.g., counseling, library, gifted and talented programs.)	6.11	.013*

The first finding was predictable. In the second instance, administrators tended to agree (26 to 6) while school board members were quite neutral (8 of 17 agreeing). Apparently the board members did not view "mix and quality" with the same level of concern as did administrators.

Analysis of "Other Questions"

A few additional responses were requested exclusively from the group of school board members and administrators in consortium schools. These data were tallied but not analyzed further. We asked respondents to consider three sets of questions. The first set asked them to explain the interest in the School District Boundary Restructuring program. (Note that we asked for a general perception, not for the reasons for participation by their districts.) The results are presented in Table 15.

Table 15

Responses to the Question: How Do You Explain the Phenomenal Interest in Participation in the School District Boundary Restructuring Program?*

Reason**	Role	Not a Reason for Involvement	Minor Reason	Part or One Reason	Major Reason
Need was great	SB	3	2	11	1
	Adm	3	4	15	5
	Total	6	6	26	6
Revenue was available	SB	3	5	6	3
	Adm	4	7	14	2
	Total	7	12	20	5
Enrollment erosion dictated	SB	2	0	5	10
	Adm	2	1	11	13
	Total	4	1	16	23
Economic conditions suggested	SB	0	2	5	10
	Adm	1	0	12	14
	Total	1	2	17	24
Needed to improve program	SB	1	0	5	11
	Adm	1	0	9	17
	Total	2	0	14	28
Everyone doing it	SB	15	1	1	0
	Adm	14	12	1	0
	Total	29	13	2	0

Table 15--Continued

Reason**	Role	Not a Reason for Involvement	Minor Reason	Part or One Reason	Major Reason
Positive potentials	SB	0	0	4	13
	Adm	1	1	8	17
	Total	1	1	12	30
Need to consider community differently	SB	0	3	7	7
	Adm	2	3	14	8
	Total	2	6	21	15

**n* = seventeen school board members and twenty-seven administrators from consortium schools.

**Full statements to which responses were made:
- The need for revenue was so great.
- Revenue was available and there was no negative consequence foreseeable in securing it.
- Enrollment erosion dictated that we consider cooperation or reorganization.
- Economic conditions in the state and district suggested that we consider cooperation or reorganization.
- We needed to find ways to expand (or improve) our programs and services.
- It was what everyone was doing.
- We saw positive potentials in collaboration for improving service, for controlling costs, or both.
- Our demographic and economic circumstances suggest that we need to think about "our community" differently.

By using modal responses for assessing reasons for pursuing incentive funds, we observe that respondents did not become involved because "everyone was doing it." Part of the reason for pursuing those funds occurred because "the need for revenue was so great," because "revenue was available and there was no negative consequence foreseeable in securing it," and because "our demographic and economic circumstances suggest that we need to think about 'our community' differently."

The major reasons for seeking funds, however, were because "enrollment erosion dictated that we consider cooperation or reorganization," because "economic conditions in the state and district suggested that we consider cooperation or reorganization," because "we needed to find ways to expand (or improve) our programs and services," and because "we saw positive potentials in collaboration for improving service, for controlling cost, or both." Sixty percent of the respondents indicated these were the major reasons for seeking incentive funds. Another 34% of the respondents indicated these items were, at least, part of the reason for seeking incentive funds.

Quite clearly there existed some opportunism in the pursuit of funds (examine responses to items 1, 2, and 6). At the same time, we judge that the primary motivations for pursuing funds related to profound and legitimate objectives. Moreover, other data suggest that once into the deliberative process (once a forum was available for deliberation), the motives became both clearer and stronger.

We asked whether attitudes toward reorganization had changed as a result of participation in the consortium activity. Details regarding this question are contained in Table 16.

Table 16

Responses to the Statements: Characterize Your Attitude toward Reorganization

(1) before and (2) after You Got into Consortium Activity*

Characterization**	Role	Before N	Before %	After N	After %
No response	SB	0	0	2	12
	Adm	0	0	2	7
	Total	0	0	4	9
Enthusiastic	SB	4	24	9	52
	Adm	8	30	8	30
	Total	12	27	17	39
Some potential	SB	9	53	6	35
	Adm	14	52	15	56
	Total	23	52	21	48
Neither pro nor con	SB	4	24	0	0
	Adm	3	11	2	7
	Total	7	16	2	5
Antagonistic	SB	0	0	0	0
	Adm	2	7	0	0
	Total	2	15	0	0

**n* = seventeen board members and twenty-seven administrators from consortium schools.

**Full statements to which responses were made:
- Enthusiastic = Generally enthusiastic about reorganization.
- Some potential = Believed reorganization had some potentials.
- Neither pro nor con = Neither pro nor con on the matter or reorganization.
- Antagonistic = Antagonistic to reorganization.

For the total group, there existed a slightly more positive attitude toward reorganization after involvement in consortium activity (particularly among school board respondents). However, two school board members and four administrators reported decreased levels of enthusiasm for reorganization after involvement in consortium activity.

We asked respondents to judge whether the timeline for moving from initial consortium planning to the reorganization vote was about right, too short, or too long. Table 17 reports responses to this statement.

Table 17

Responses to the Statement: The Planning and Functioning Period for Consortiums (One Year Planning, Three Years Functioning) Is about the Right Amount of Time Prior to a Reorganization Vote

	Agree	Too Short a Time	Too Long a Time
School board members	10	6	1
Administrators	11	15	1
Total	21	21	2

The total number responding "agree" and "too short a time" were equal. However, school board members tended to agree while administrators tended to wish for more time.

Finally, we asked respondents to predict what would happen to interdistrict collaboration if the law were abandoned. Table 18 reports responses to this statement.

Table 18

Responses to the Statement: Even If the Law Is Abandoned by the Present Legislature, Collaboration between and among School Districts Is Likely to ?

	Expand	Continue	Decline	Disappear
School board members	4	12	3	0
Administrators	6	18	4	0
Total	10	30	7	0

Respondents expected interdistrict collaboration to continue even if the legislature abandoned the consortium initiative. Some, in fact, expected collaboration to expand; almost an equal number expected collaboration to decline though none thought collaboration would disappear.

Summary of Survey Results

In summary, school board members and administrators from schools in consortiums and from schools not in consortiums were asked to react to a series of statements.

There was agreement that a rationale for collaboration existed; there was agreement that collaboration held many positive potentials for schools to enhance services or control costs. There was less agreement regarding interpretations or opinions surrounding the law (and the in-consortium and not in-consortium groups divided on these perceptions in a manner which could properly be labeled a highly significant way). There was little agreement and considerable variance among respondents when they were asked to react to alternative policy choices.

The in-consortium group indicated several reasons for involvement in the consortium activity. Prominent in their perceptions were continuing enrollment erosion, economic conditions in the state and district, a perceived need to expand their district's programs and services, and the perceived positive potentials in collaboration.

Some modest increased approbation for reorganization appeared to be a consequence of the consortium activity. Administrators in consortiums tended to perceive the three-year functioning period as inadequate prior to a reorganization vote. Most respondents believed that collaboration would continue even if the law were abandoned and incentive payments interrupted.

PERCEPTIONS OF ACTORS

We interviewed several individuals positioned to provide somewhat different perspectives regarding the School District Boundary Restructuring laws. We talked to a superintendent of schools (Bjornson) who, with others, had initiated the original proposal. We talked to a legislator (Gates) who, with others, reconceptualized and modified the original bill draft. We talked to agency personnel--State Superintendent Wayne Sanstead and Program Director Thomas Decker. We talked to administrators who had been involved at the consortium level (Cheney, Gegelman, Nybladh, Rassier, Sylling). These individuals shared perceptions from earlier, midstream, later, and withdrawing unit positions. We talked to a consultant (Piper) who became involved with a number of units in the early planning activity. One the present authors (Hill) had a similar involvement with seven units.

Some interview citations are contained elsewhere in this monograph. Here, however, the chronology of activity is revisited in a different way.

Bjornson (1993) recalled that the idea for boundary restructuring legislation was "hatched" during a coffee break at a Council of School Administrators legislative committee meeting. He, along with superintendents Larry Nudell, David Smette, Gerald Gauderman, and possibly others and Executive Director Larry Klundt, reasoned that "we ought to propose something radical to alert people to the need for change."

With the encouragement of the others, Nudell, Klundt, and Bjornson discussed--at a series of "at least three meetings"--the shape of the proposal. Their original idea was quite simply administrative restructuring. They reasoned that one superintendent could take care of six or more districts, excluding the larger enrollment districts from consideration. This would permit placing a full-time principal, whose job would be instructional leadership, at the building level. Savings would occur because fewer (about 200 fewer) superintendents would be required, fewer business managers would be required, and fewer boards and attendant board expenses would be required.

They considered several geographic scenarios. Initially "county units" were examined. (North Dakota has 53 counties.) "The way people and kids were distributed across the state and the way school district lines did not respect county lines" rendered this scheme inadvisable "even when some counties were combined" (Bjornson, 1993).

Someone--Bjornson does not remember who--suggested that the Class B basketball "districts" combined similar numbers of schools and enrolled roughly similar numbers of students. These districts--40 in number--became the organizing framework for the proposal. When the eight large school units were added, the draft proposal suggested that the state reorganize into 48 districts.

"Klundt arranged to put the proposal in bill draft form, and he also arranged discussions with legislators and officials from Governor Sinner's office" (Bjornson, 1993). Governor Sinner liked the idea and endorsed the proposal. The proposal was presented formally to a legislative interim committee. The proposal was introduced as House Bill 1507 during the 1989 session.

Media publicized the proposal widely. Bjornson reported that he and Nudell met "many times" with groups across the state. Some liked the idea; others did not. "I have a whole box of mail--not all of it positive, in fact, not much of it positive--from every corner of the state" (Bjornson, 1993).

"It became pretty obvious, early in the session, that the idea was not going to fly in the form proposed" (Gates, 1993). Still, Gates, state legislative representative from Grand Forks, reported he had been concerned for a long time that not all North Dakota students were receiving a good quality education. He saw in the proposed restructuring a potential to address both quality and economy issues. He discussed modifications of the bill "with several legislators, especially on the House Education Committee," which he chaired.

Then with Ray Schmidt (representative from Ray), Cathy Rydell (representative from Bismarck), and Larry Klundt, "we sat down in Rydell's kitchen one night and hammered out an alternative. . . . Our idea was to secure pilot units--one east and one west of Highway 83--which would not only effect economies through restructuring but would also require improvements in school programs and services. While our amendment to the original bill was itself amended [the two pilot units idea was replaced by capacity for ten planning units, for instance], the shape of what was eventually passed was pretty much what we crafted that night" (Gates, 1993).

Gates reported that he had no idea at the time of adoption whether or not the idea would be attractive to school district officials and, in fact, "I was surprised initially that so many districts were willing to try" restructuring. Also, while the "original attraction may have been more money, I'm satisfied that very soon [participants perceived] that this was a way to have good things happen for kids."

By the second legislative session in 1991, however, it was obvious to Gates and others that "a flood" of interest existed. That level of interest, of course, inflated the cost. While Gates perceived that a feature of the 1991 restructuring bill, a "purchaser-provider" arrangement, reduced antagonism to the law, he acknowledged that antagonism seemed to be building among educators themselves. Gates judged that much of the antagonism arose from arguments about priorities in funding--"put more money into the foundation program before you fund the restructuring program"--rather than disdain for the restructuring idea itself.

In 1991, in any case, the law was reauthorized. The appropriation to cover the cost rose from one-half million dollars for the 1989-91 biennium to six million dollars for the 1991-93 biennium. The estimates for continuing the same law in 1993 and 1995 were twelve million and twenty million dollars, respectively (Decker, 1993).

The 1991 law differed from the 1989 law in several respects. Senate Bill 2034, like 1507, contained planning money to fund planning processes. Approval mechanisms remained the same. Incentive monies were assured for approved units. However, legislators, at the request of DPI, included several modifications. Units already approved but which failed to achieve the thresholds in size or enrollment for new units were "grandfathered in." Units were permitted to receive their third incentive payment in two half payments for the third and fourth years. (This permitted a longer trial period of four years before the reorganization vote.) Large enrollment districts were permitted to become "provider" districts and smaller enrollment districts in their areas could become "purchaser" districts. (This feature addressed some criticisms from both large and small districts which, some perceived, were removed by geographic or size circumstances from fashioning program improvements or securing incentive monies or both.) And, a modified reorganization process was designed because the "old" reorganization law involved "county reorganization committees" and since many of the consortia spilled across five and six counties, the existing law was regarded as unnecessarily and undesirably cumbersome (Decker, 1993).

One feature of the reorganization process legislated in 1991 remains unresolved, at least in the minds of the writers. The law permitted districts to reorganize, so long as they were contiguous, even if all districts which voted on the reorganization did not approve--did not vote for--reorganization. Thus, in the Greater Nelson County Consortium, five districts (Aneta, McVille, Michigan, Tolna, and Unity) approved the seven district proposal while two (Crary and Lakota) did not. The five districts were permitted, under the law, to organize as a single district (Dakota Prairie). The issue may be stated as a question: "Could not a resident of the Dakota Prairie district allege that he or she voted for a seven-district unit and got a five-district unit--a result which, technically, had never been approved?" That issue was discussed during the 1991 session but, apparently, will remain moot unless case law or modification in the law occurs in the future.

In 1993, an effort was made to reauthorize the 1991 law. "While the original [1989] law was developed outside the department, we were not unmindful of the conditions which led to the law nor unsympathetic to the purposes contained in the law," State Superintendent Wayne Sanstead recalled (Sanstead, 1993).

"After the law was passed, we had to administer it." Sanstead recalled that they (DPI) tried very hard to administer it well. DPI created an advisory committee to guide implementation, secured personnel to execute the provisions of the law, set in motion approval mechanisms, and, somewhere along the line, came "to be regarded as the prime advocates" (Sanstead, 1993).

"Well, by 1991, we were advocates," Sanstead reported. He reported that he personally saw the law addressing some of the persistent problems educators in North Dakota faced. Moreover, he reported that he, like others, became aware of some of the "tremendous improvements" schools were making in providing programs and services. He reported that he was "confident" that units receiving incentive payments were employing those payments in the manner they had proposed. "People [in consortium units] were excited about their success" (Sanstead, 1993).

Still, despite support from DPI and intense lobbying from consortium officials, legislators disassembled the law in 1993. "They gave us enough money for a decent burial," Sanstead (1993) opined. "DPI refused to see the handwriting on the wall," Gates (1993) suggested. He reported that the cost of maintenance--twelve million--was "not going to fly." Legislators fashioned a "phaseout" which continued incentives for an additional year for those units which were already receiving incentives and a "pot" of about $200,000 to be shared by other units, subsequent to another competitive proposal activity, for units which were formed but which had not received incentive payments (Sanstead, 1993). In terms employed by DPI, the 1990 and 1991 "implementation units" shared in the phaseout incentive but the 1992-93 approved and "waiting list" units were eligible only to participate in the grant competition.

"The result was devastating," Decker (1993) reported. "Many units which had formed and which were functioning were bitterly disappointed." Many of the units, however, have formally agreed to continue as consortiums even though incentive monies are no longer available (Gegelman, 1993; Rassier, 1993; Sanstead, 1993).

Towner Superintendent of Schools and former coordinator of the North Central Consortium, Larry Gegelman, observed, "Even though only two districts in our consortium voted for reorganization, we're continuing to work together" (Gegelman, 1993). He listed several initiatives which had not been lost--ITV, an art program, shared counselors, gifted and talented program, and modern foreign language offerings. Gegelman observed, "The conditions which led to the formation of the consortium have not changed; if anything they're getting worse." "Our problem," Gegelman believed, "was that we voted on an 'efficient' solution rather than a 'politically feasible' solution." The districts may evolve toward that "efficient solution," in Gegelman's view, but the change proposed by the reorganization plan was "too dramatic." (The writers note that the two districts--Towner and Velva--which voted for reorganization in the six-district North Central Consortium were the two communities in which high schools would have been located had the reorganization plan been approved.)

Charles Cheney, Assistant Superintendent of Schools in West Fargo who served as a coordinator for the Tri-District Consortium (Clifford-Galesburg, Hope, and Page school districts) and who wrote the reorganization plan "over about a four-month period," reported similar perceptions. Only Page (where the high school would have been located) voted for the plan; Hope and Clifford-Galesburg did not. (Clifford-Galesburg has since annexed to the Mayville-Portland school district which district is itself in the Heart of the Valley Consortium.)

Cheney (1993) reported that Page and Hope had a long history of cooperating, "especially in sports co-ops." Even after the negative reorganization vote, the districts continued to cooperate, "sharing teachers and counselors, though an art program was dropped." Cheney observed that district officials believe "they can't continue as they are," but that no across-district solution is apparent at this time. Some discussions, particularly with a southern neighbor, have occurred about a different three-district solution. Cheney was not prepared to predict how that possibility was likely to evolve. Thus, for this unit at least, some concern and ambiguity remain.

The Rural Cass Consortium was in the second year of operation when we interviewed coordinator Larry Nybladh, who served also as Superintendent of Schools at Casselton. Originally a six-district unit (Cass Valley North, Casselton, Chaffee, Dakota, Kindred, and Leonard), the consortium became a four-district unit when Kindred and Leonard dropped out during the planning process.

Nybladh perceived many potentials in collaboration: "quality and comprehensiveness of service, teachers able to specialize and network, efficient and expanded use of technologies." He was not unmindful of complications: "Board members had to develop a personal [trusting] relationship before they could work together. Different-sized districts make for complications. Different value systems (especially regarding comprehensiveness of program required) need to be recognized and accommodated. We have different visions of what is possible" (Nybladh, 1993).

Moreover, the sheer volume of work and the logistical problems in maintaining contacts with everyone proved daunting. Further, this occurred where the state role and DPI participation were sometimes perceived to be inconsistent or changing, where outside consultant use was unfamiliar and not always entirely satisfactory, and where the inevitable fights at the board level were mistakenly perceived by the public as "antagonistic to ends rather than an inevitable part of changing" (Nybladh, 1993).

Several respondents (Gegelman, 1993; Nybladh, 1993; Rassier, 1993) observed approvingly that consortium activity required examining education issues as distinct from management issues. Moreover, consortium activity permitted board members to see, sometimes for the first time, programs, facilities, and services available in other districts (Nybladh, 1993).

Not all units approved will receive incentive payments. Yellowstone Trail, for instance, received March 1993 State Board approval after a fall 1992 planning process but was ineligible for incentive payments until the fall of 1993. By that time, however, the legislature had altered the rules for receiving incentive payments.

Still, "the residual of the planning money [after planning expenses] together with our $25,000 advance to remain active in 1993 permits us to pursue quite a bit of collaborative activity" (Rassier, 1993). In fact, Rassier, who is both the Superintendent of Schools at Hettinger and Yellowstone Trail Consortium coordinator, considered that the circumstance was "not all bad--we can evolve slowly rather than force a vote--maybe we're lucky." Rassier reported that the districts had staged staff inservice programs at a single site; that they were using interactive TV (three sites, six teachers, seven semester courses); that they have employed a curriculum coordinator and had already made considerable progress in mathematics, physical education, business education, and social studies; and that the consortium board continues to meet each month to manage activity and consider further collaboration. Rassier was reluctant to predict the probability of long-term collaboration because "that depends on the cast of characters" but that administrative restructuring was a distinct possibility.

Not all planning units proceeded to a final report. The Lonetree Consortium, a unit of seven districts which had a history of considerable interdistrict cooperation, including the sharing of administrators, did not complete the planning process. During the planning activity members discussed if "we're just too [geographically] big," if "we ought to focus on how we want to cooperate--like special education," and if "we were so nice we wouldn't talk about closing schools" (Sylling, 1993).

Not all districts which entered consortiums or consortium planning stayed with their partners. Thus, Surrey left the North Central Consortium after a year of operation, and Salund left the Ransom County Consortium and Central left the Yellowstone Trail Consortium during the planning process.

In general, however, units which formed remained intact. Units experienced program enhancements. Whether or not reorganization votes were positive, interdistrict cooperation continued though sometimes at a reduced level. And, at least those interviewed perceived the conditions which led to the activity as continuing and they perceived interdistrict cooperation as continuing to offer potentials for service and economy.

Dr. Donald Piper, Professor of Educational Administration at the University of North Dakota, occupied a role in consortium activity which permitted a comprehensive assessment of the processes and events associated with the activity. Piper served as consultant to seven consortia in the development of final reports; he consulted other units informally; he participated in mid-year assessments; and he was consulted by DPI and others regarding legislative initiatives. Moreover, he had long worked with school districts in collaborative efforts which were not associated with this particular set of laws.

Piper (1993) stated that the consortium activity "had the potential to effect the most significant positive change in education in the more than 20 years I've been viewing [the educational scene]." He was asked to describe his work as a consultant. "My job was that of process facilitator," he replied. "I knew how to manage the process and [that process permitted me to secure] the judgments and choices from the planning group which formed the content of the reports." He judged that the product of his effort was "to secure an approvable proposal and a consortium that would work," by which he meant would continue to function effectively.

Asked to detail the process he employed, Piper (1993) outlined the series of meetings which eventuated in the proposal. (1) "I would meet with administrators and interim board members and lay out the 'Piper process.'" This meeting addressed who would be involved (Piper insisted on inclusion of teachers and parents in the planning process); how the activity would be structured so that the proposal would evolve; and how the activity would be scheduled, managed, and costed. (2) The second meeting was a public meeting which as many as 130 persons attended. This was an initial effort to "inform and disarm" a broader public regarding the purpose for the activity and the process about to be entered. This meeting was also used to access perceptions and opinions ("hopes, dreams, and expectations") of attendees and to organize the study committee. In Piper's process, three subcommittees engaged questions about (a) curricular and extracurricular activities, (b) personnel and administrative services, and (c) facilities, technology, and transportation. (3) Then, in "a series of five to seven" meetings, the data interpretation and the planning occurred. While each planning member was assigned to a single planning group, mechanisms which assured informing and consensus building across groups were structured. (4) Parallel with the planning activity there existed a data collection activity carried forward by the consultant and the administrators to inform the planning process. For instance, Piper gathered financial information and histories of enrollments and provided projections which assisted in the deliberations. Another important element in the process, according to Piper, included "building walk throughs." Every member of the planning group saw all parts of every school building in the unit.

Piper (1993) regarded an "important part of the process was to get the interim board functioning like a board" at the outset. "Sometimes in the early going," Piper reported, "I'd insist that the board deliberate and decide some minor issue. Later they were comfortable engaging more complex and controversial issues."

When asked to judge the importance of leadership in a process like this, Piper (1993) observed, "Different leaders are necessary at different times. Administrators are critical at the beginning. Then lay leadership--including leadership from parents--is absolutely crucial. [After plans are made] administrators are again important in implementation efforts."

We asked Piper what "lessons" we might learn from an interdistrict collaboration effort. He responded, "It is necessary that there be a process which will entice officials to get together on a systematic basis to plan together. The process must encourage [persons] to aspire to do better things together." [Emphasis his.] He noted, "The planning [and implementation] period might have been longer at least in some instances." He also suggested that when districts collaborate "some early--even modest--successes are important; big-risk [and more complex] issues and aspirations might be addressed later" (Piper, 1993).

We asked about his concerns regarding the process as it played out in North Dakota. Piper (1993) worried that the administrators and board members "who took tremendous risks and expended tremendous efforts" would perceive that "they had been bribed to go out on a limb and then had the limb sawed off." He also stated a concern that "many--including DPI--wanted stuff to go faster than it was really possible to go." Still, Piper was hopeful. He noted that there have been real achievements; if the processes set in motion will continue, there will be more achievements which will translate into good things for students.

THE GREATER NELSON COUNTY CONSORTIUM

The Context

Similar to other rural North Dakota school districts, the districts in the Greater Nelson County Consortium, because of the enrollment decline and decreasing resources, experienced difficulty in assuring students an appropriate variety and quality of programs and services at a reasonable cost. The consortium comprised of seven independent school districts (Aneta, Crary, Lakota, McVille, Michigan, Tolna, and Unity) is located in northeastern North Dakota. The seven districts, identified in Figure 7, occupy virtually all of Nelson County; in addition, small areas in Ramsey, Walsh, Grand Forks, Steele, Griggs, Eddy, and Benson counties are incorporated in the districts of the consortium. The districts cover a geographic area of 1,450 square miles. While district lines are irregular, the approximate east-west distance of consortium members is 46 miles and the approximate north-south distance is 44 miles.

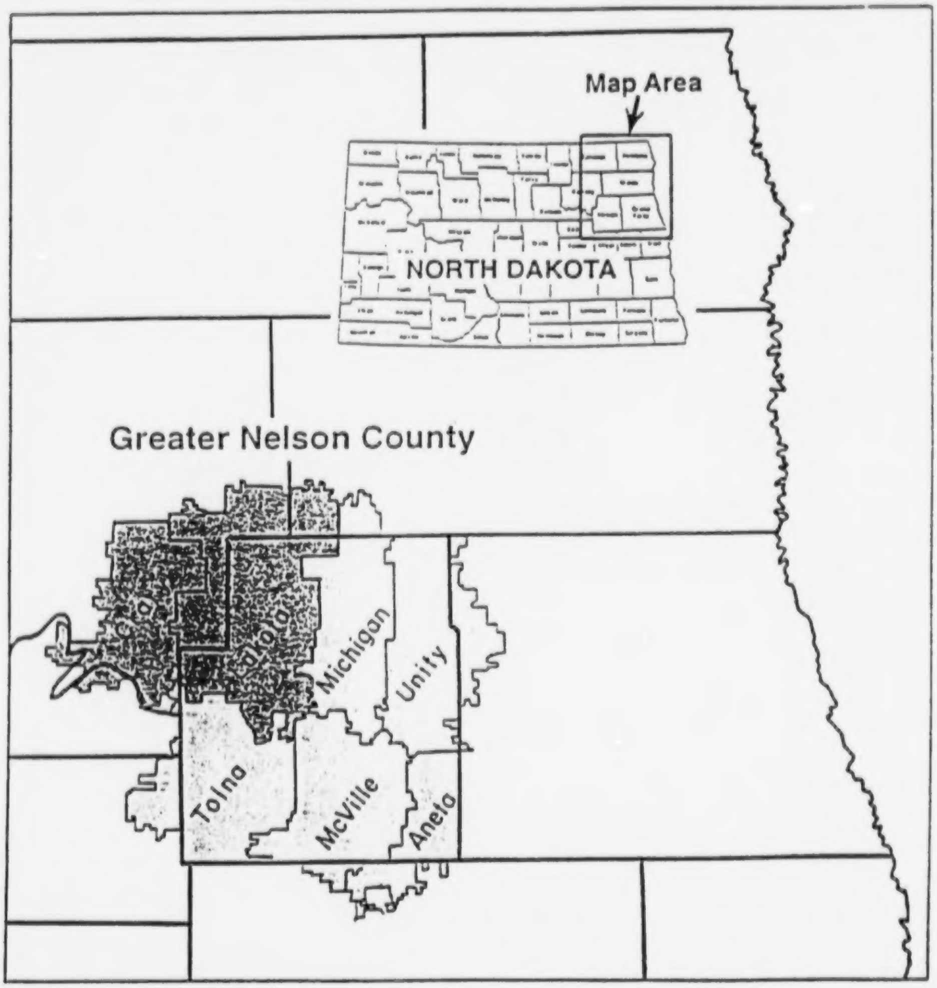

Figure 7. Greater Nelson County Consortium (adapted from Grand Forks Herald, November 11, 1992, p. 1A)

During the 1991-92 school year, the districts in the consortium enrolled 974 students and were staffed by 103 teachers (Worner, 1992). Student enrollment declined from 1,086 to 974 between the 1985-86 and the 1991-92 school years, a 10% decrease. Student enrollment is projected to decline from 974 to 871 between the 1991-92 and 1995-96 school years, another 10% decline. These changes are detailed in Tables 19 and 20. Tables 19 through 22 adapt data contained in the reorganization plan (Worner, 1992).

Table 19

Greater Nelson County Consortium Actual Changes in Average Daily Membership: 1985-86/1991-92

District	85-86	86-87	87-88	88-89	89-90	90-91	91-92
Aneta	105	94	87	78	79	67	76
Crary	66	66	51	66	61	50	31
Lakota	269	248	257	278	298	261	248
McVille	189	179	180	163	155	168	169
Michigan	150	142	128	123	125	121	150
Tolna	189	163	166	170	168	164	156
Unity	118	118	117	136	136	129	144
Total	1,086	1,010	986	1,014	1,022	960	974

Table 20

Greater Nelson County Consortium Projected Changes in Average Daily Membership: 1991-92/1995-96

District	91-92	92-93	93-94	94-95	95-96
Aneta	76	77	75	69	55
Crary	31	31	27	28	28
Lakota	248	239	240	233	222
McVille	169	164	160	169	174
Michigan	150	158	144	132	131
Tolna	156	154	154	146	134
Unity	144	123	129	130	127
Total	974	946	929	907	871

While some year-to-year increases can be seen for individual districts, the general trend is one of enrollment loss. This pattern existed in the historical data regarding membership and is projected to continue into the future.

General fund revenue and expenditure budgets for the consortium member districts have remained relatively stable over the years from 1987-88 to 1990-91. Detail regarding these data are reported in Table 21.

Table 21

Greater Nelson County Consortium General Fund Revenues, Expenditures, and Balances: 1987-88/1990-91

District	Year	Revenue	Expenditures	Balance	Millage*
Aneta	87-88	376,166	377,804	119,501	164
	88-89	380,799	380,667	119,633	190
	89-90	392,934	331,944	117,837	189
	90-91	425,862	401,060	142,638	202
Crary	87-88	358,197	343,615	137,064	163
	88-89	364,477	397,130	104,410	163
	89-90	383,037	374,281	113,167	163
	90-91	413,506	390,640	136,033	165
Lakota	87-88	1,030,983	1,027,863	191,258	152
	88-89	1,054,970	1,050,108	196,121	152
	89-90	1,193,131	1,181,952	207,301	163
	90-91	1,245,286	1,177,643	274,943	189
McVille	87-88	638,752	702,943	390,332	145
	88-89	641,136	795,777	235,691	166
	89-90	706,347	678,377	263,660	170
	90-91	735,621	778,908	200,381	185
Michigan	87-88	596,622	553,186	221,527	146
	88-89	574,340	588,477	207,488	166
	89-90	590,850	597,999	200,338	173
	90-91	654,454	613,528	236,848	185
Tolna	87-88	601,853	557,210	186,379	160
	88-89	623,630	614,085	195,923	172
	89-90	626,910	652,906	169,928	177
	90-91	708,348	669,692	208,584	190
Unity	87-88	1,287,161	1,380,118	35,965	151
	88-89	709,869	667,964	77,870	182
	89-90	716,496	709,136	85,229	198
	90-91	731,379	613,673	202,935	209

*Rounded to nearest mill

In spite of enrollment erosion, expenditures creep upwards; similarly, millages have increased. (The one dramatic change--Unity 87-88 to 88-89--is explained by a building expense related to fire damage and an insurance payment to cover renovation.)

Like other rural districts experiencing enrollment and revenue shrinkage, the districts found it difficult to consider any significant expansion of programs and services. In fact, they have attempted to make budgetary reductions. They have increased their millages--a consequence of a loss of school district property valuation in the several districts. Table 22 shows that the taxable valuations of all seven districts declined substantially between 1985 and 1991. Aggregated, the school districts lost $1,358,285 in taxable valuation or a decline of 9.42%. The consequence of declining taxable valuation for the school districts is that property owners' mill rates must be increased to offset the loss of revenues for the support of educational programs and services.

Table 22

Greater Nelson County Consortium Taxable Valuations: 1985-1991

	1985	1991	Difference
Aneta	1,179,561	1,049,421	-130,140
Crary	1,397,624	1,270,891	-116,733
Lakota	3,811,377	3,514,581	-296,796
McVille	2,001,314	1,818,151	-183,163
Michigan	1,813,973	1,662,596	-151,377
Tolna	1,777,941	1,561,812	-216,129
Unity	2,442,850	2,178,903	-263,947
Total	14,424,640	13,056,355	-1,358,285

Every district has experienced a reduction in taxable valuations. The reductions range from about 8% to about 12% of 1985 valuations.

In North Dakota, finances for the operation of schools are driven by the number of students. Stable or declining enrollments typically result in stable or diminished financial resources. This circumstance frequently means reduced staff, reduced services and programs, unmet facility and equipment needs, and reduced quality.

In this context of enrollment erosion and cost increases, the Greater Nelson County Consortium members proposed in 1990 that they be considered for supplemental pupil payments as specified in the School District Boundary Restructuring law. The unit was approved, secured a planning grant, wrote a "final report," and was approved to receive incentive payments.

Consistent with the law, an interim district (consortium) board was established to oversee the operation of the unit and the preparation of the reorganizing plan. In this latter responsibility, the primary duties of the interim board were to gather essential data and to design a reorganization plan. The board proposed the merger of the school districts of Aneta, Crary, McVille, Lakota, Michigan, Tolna, and Unity into a single district.

In November 1992, five of the districts (Aneta, McVille, Tolna, Michigan, and Unity) voted to reorganize into one school district, and two districts (Crary and Lakota) voted not to become members. The newly formed district was named the Dakota Prairie School District. Following the vote, the five districts proceeded to complete the reorganization process by electing a five-member school board which was elected at large with one member residing in each of the five original school districts of the Dakota Prairie School District. The five school boards from the individual school districts were dissolved in July of 1993. A superintendent for the new Dakota Prairie School District was selected and began employment July 1993.

The new district has continued to expand and enhance cooperative activities and services between schools in the district. The school configuration for the 1993-94 school year was arranged as follows: Michigan, K-6; Petersburg, 7-12; Aneta, K-6; McVille, K-4, 7-12; Tolna, K-12.

The new district officials presented a bond issue proposal in December of 1993 to the electorate. The proceeds from the bond issue would have been used to construct a single, new centrally located pre K-12 school facility to house the students and staff of the Dakota Prairie School District. The proposal was not approved, although the margin of defeat was not great. At the date of this writing, what will occur next is not known.

The Design and Conduct of the Case Study

This case study employed focus group interviews to secure the perceptions of 11th and 12th grade students, parents, and teachers in the original seven school districts in the Greater Nelson County Consortium regarding the reorganization of the schools in the county. Krueger (1988) defined a focus group as a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions of a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment. Focus groups have a rather narrow purpose for which they work particularly well--to determine perceptions and feelings of consumers about services or opportunities.

Studies have frequently examined perceptions of administrators and board members. Less frequently the perceptions of the other actors (teachers, parents, and students) have been examined. The present study, however, permitted securing perceptions from these groups.

Representative participants in the groups were recruited by school administrators, and letters were sent to prospective participants seeking their consent to participate. The focus groups, which were held in the schools, consisted of three groups of ten 11th and 12th grade students, three groups of eight to ten parents, and three groups of eight to ten teachers from the original consortium school districts. One of the writers (Carlson) served as moderator of the one-hour to 90-minute group interactions. Each session was audiotape recorded, and all tapes were transcribed. Group discussion centered around six open-ended questions asked by the moderator. Additional probing questions were asked to assist in clarifying or amplifying statements made by participants.

The analysis of the focus group data revealed a consistency of perceptions among the student, parent, and teacher groups. Initially, student transcriptions were analyzed, followed by a parent and teacher data analysis. Students demonstrated an extensive understanding and insight pertaining to the impact of consolidation on their community and school. As the teacher and parent responses were examined, a comparison with student responses was undertaken. It was interesting to find a consistency between the student responses and the parent and teacher responses. The few additional perceptions of teachers and parents were added to the theme set evolving from the analysis system.

The following narrative is an analysis of the perceptions of students, teachers, and parents of the seven districts regarding the reorganization of school districts in the original Greater Nelson County Consortium.

Analysis of the transcribed interview data was initiated by the search for "themes" apparent in the discussions. Three investigators independently read the entire set of transcriptions and searched for themes that they believed reflected emerging constructs. When the search was complete, four themes became evident. (Perceptions are described and illustrative quotes are used to clarify and to provide specific statements used by the participants. The quotations were edited only slightly--primarily to reduce "ahs" and "you knows" and occasionally to make a complete sentence or improve syntax.)

Four themes emerged through the focus group interviews: (1) recognition of the circumstances which led to consolidation discussions, (2) understanding of the significance of quality of education and of an opportunity to influence that quality, (3) assignment of the centrality of communication and interpersonal relationships, and (4) concern regarding the effect of consolidation on the community.

Circumstances Which Led to Consolidation Discussions

Students, parents, and teachers perceived the circumstances leading to consolidation discussion similarly to the case made by the statistics presented in the introduction to the case study. They perceived a need for a larger student population so that a better quality education could be offered to the students. They saw that the districts needed to increase their enrollments to provide the courses and services mandated by the state for graduation and required for college entrance. Their declining enrollment had generated fewer dollars in foundation aid from the state and, therefore, the districts were losing capacity to provide the quality educational program so important to the communities.

> Parent: I would say most people weren't aware of the dire straits that these schools were in and without sharing, without combining resources, without combining students, and without combining the tax base, we just couldn't survive on our own.

The districts in this consortium had been involved in collaborative efforts for several years and had seen the benefits of sharing among districts. Subsequently, parents saw consolidation as an additional avenue for sharing resources and improving quality of education.

The incentives program from the state Department of Public Instruction was a perceived catalyst for consolidation discussions.

> Parent: We could see that ten years down the line if we tried to go it alone we'd be gone; we'd be history. The right people had the foresight to see that something had to be done and fortunately the consortium money was available and that's what got most people steered in that direction.

> Parent: I think the state foundation aid payments were not at the level where they should have been. We were relying on our real estate taxes basically to fund the schools. We just couldn't afford to offer the curriculum we would've liked to in our school.

> Parent: To be honest, when it started, I think, it was looked on as a source of money for our school to keep going. We'll get that money for three years; we'll vote it all down and then we'll just keep on going.

> Teacher: We got the message from the legislature, that this was our opportunity to do something about it and, perhaps, if we didn't the state would do it for us.

Quality of Education--Opportunity

Because of declining enrollments and inadequate finances, districts in the consortium were experiencing difficulties in providing educational programs of high quality. All participants placed a heavy emphasis on the desire to provide a quality education and to provide expanded opportunities for the students of their communities. Students, parents, and teachers expressed a concern for assisting students in becoming ready for the 21st century. It was their hope that consolidation efforts would assist their districts in fulfilling the state accreditation and college course requirements.

> Parent: The role of the school has changed a lot with society, in that, the old schooling from 20, 30, 40 years ago just doesn't hold up in our world anymore, and our students have to be able to come out of our school and be able to go anywhere in the world.

Increased state and college requirements fostered the need for expansion of the school curriculum. Students, parents, and teachers noted that more courses were needed to prepare students for college or for future employment. There are classes which students want and need, and the communities desire to provide the program for the students.

> Student: State mandates and college entrance guidelines required additional advanced math, advanced science, foreign language, technology, guidance services, vocational courses, and special services which our district was unable to afford with our declining enrollment.

> Parent: Most of the high school kids that come out of these schools now are at such a disadvantage because they basically have a year to make up unless they're absolutely exceptional students.

> Parent: If you have a bigger curriculum for students, your achievers can keep pushing themselves more, and if you have a bigger class, I think you have a better chance to get the average person to work a little harder. If you have a larger curriculum, there are more things students will be interested in doing which may increase their interest. They may be more likely to go to college and not quit high school.

Consolidation could provide additional opportunities for students through expanded co-curricular activities. These additional sports and activities would provide diverse opportunities for students. More students could be involved with a greater variety of choices. Students would be able to participate in activities in which they are interested rather than participate just to get enough numbers for a team. However, along with increased numbers of students participating comes increased competition which could cause some students to be "cut" from the team. By contrast, in the small schools everyone who wants to be included is permitted to participate. Students expressed a concern about traveling too far in the cold winters and, because of the distance, the trip home may be late and may be expensive.

> Parent: Sports gets the advertising. Sports gets the top priority when you look at the paper or the news. Their good curriculum isn't going to get advertised on the news at night, but it's the sports that draws peoples' attention to a town.

> Student: I think more sports will be offered for more kids because now you get a choice of one sport for the season. It's basketball and cheerleading or baseball and track. But if there are more kids in the school, there's going to be more choices and so a lot more kids will get involved instead of just hanging around and getting in trouble.

Another important point made by all groups was the desire to meet the special needs of all students. This has been extremely difficult in the small schools. Larger enrollment can provide for equal opportunity for all and will assist in providing services for special needs students.

Students recognized a closeness with their teachers, superintendents, cooks, and custodians in their small school but feared that some of that family feeling may be lost in a larger school. They commented that their teachers really care about them and that in a larger school they may not feel as comfortable about talking with a teacher. The students speculated that fewer teachers may be needed in a consolidated school, and, therefore, many good teachers who are lower in seniority may be lost. Another concern that groups expressed was that increased numbers bring less opportunity for one-on-one help from the teacher.

> Teacher: I know it's true from experience that when I had fewer students naturally you have more time for individual help.

> Student: I like the small classes, but the new classes still won't be big. We're just like a family.

> Student: We will have less individual help from the teachers. We're scared kids will think we're stupid if we ask the teacher for help. It's easy in a big school to slough off. Nobody will care if I flunk out--what's the difference.

Students saw larger districts with the advantage of drawing a larger pool of teaching applicants with better qualifications. Students and parents recognized a possibility of a greater diversity in teacher instructional styles which could be geared more to the specific needs of the students. Several students indicated that it would be nice not to have the same teacher for a particular course all three years of high school. Teachers would be more likely to teach in their major field which would provide more depth, expertise, and specialization to the classroom instruction. Teachers reported the possibility of fewer preparations and the greater opportunity for teacher communication and camaraderie through shared inservice sessions and team sharing.

> Student: I think teachers would get the opportunity to teach classes that they're best at. When you have a small school like this, I think they end up teaching a lot of classes that they're not qualified in and a lot of times they have hardly any free time during the day to get ready or prepare for their classes. As a result of a heavy schedule of a teacher, we suffer. The kids suffer because the teachers just don't have enough time to prepare.

> Teacher: We might have fewer "preps" each day which means that we would teach the same class two or three times a day which may make us better teachers. We won't have to spend so much time on many different classes.

> Teacher: If you have two or three teachers that are all English teachers, almost everyone has something that they would rather teach, like in English, we'd rather teach writing than reading or vice versa. If you go into the classroom and you don't like teaching, what kind of a message do you send? They can read it off your face.

An important aspect of any quality educational program is the affective domain. Participants expressed this perception as they discussed the importance of relationships with others. Students reported that they needed to learn to relate with others in preparation for the world outside their present community. Not only did they look forward to getting to know new friends but they also valued exposure to diverse points of view. Teachers and parents saw potential for a wider selection of friends who would share like interests with the students.

> Teacher: Students want to fit in so badly with all ten kids that are in their class so they're going to go out to the party and drink so that they fit in. If there are more kids, they do not have to do that because they would fit in with the groups that are more like them.

> Teacher: It seems that with more kids in a school you're going to find a peer group that you're going to be happier with. If there are only five in your class and you don't like four of them, you are out of luck.

Students expressed some concerns about the cliques when five districts come together. They know everyone in their entire district now but will have to get to know a new group of students. They saw that it will take a while to see all as equal. They have done some cooperating with contiguous districts so the sharing of resources will not be an entirely new experience for them. The participants continually stressed that the new school will not be a big class "A" school as perceived by some. It will still be small enough to provide some of the assets of a small school.

> Teacher: We have had small classes for many years. Twenty was probably a huge class at some point in time so the numbers are scaring people simply because it's something that's never been done before. But 25 in a classroom is a piece of cake. I think the numbers are scaring people and it's not worth being scared about because it's really not that big.

Because consolidation will not increase the enrollment, aggregate revenues from the state will be comparable to past revenues; however, a single unit will permit some economies of scale permitting the unit to become more cost effective. Fewer teachers and administrators will be needed when resources are shared among districts. Consequently, teachers believed that consolidation will allow for better quality of education for a lower cost. A parent stated that "all this discussion comes down to dollars." The small districts which are losing funding yearly and at the same time experiencing rising costs cannot afford to continue as they are and still provide a high quality educational program. The teachers saw volume buying of materials as a possibility with increased student population. Maybe they could finally upgrade their instructional materials.

> Parent: Our district has looked at ways of staying alive without raising taxes and has looked for ways to save money. Eliminating a position was

> usually done, but with the consortium, hopefully, we are getting a tax benefit and increased education opportunities at the same time.

There were contradictory beliefs about the effect of transportation on quality of education. Transportation was already a problem in the sharing activities already organized. Students and teachers have experienced wasted instructional time when students are transported from one school to another for various courses in the several districts. Because they do not spend their entire day at one school, students reported that they miss the extra help from the teachers. On the other hand, if the new "one" school is built, teachers and students were concerned that some students may have to ride the bus too long at the beginning and end of the day. Thus, school days become longer. The positive note was that districts could share in transportation costs.

> Student: Sometimes we have to leave in the middle of doing a lab or something in order to take a physics class in another school. The lab then has to wait until tomorrow and by that time I might have forgotten some of the stuff we were doing or hadn't covered while I was in class.

All respondent groups commented that achievement will increase when schools consolidate because along with larger numbers comes greater competition among students. It was their belief that the brighter students will be challenged; this has already occurred as evidenced by some parents observing their children becoming more grade conscious when attending a consortium school.

> Teacher: I can see the challenge of having a little bit bigger class if the class is too small. They aren't challenged to do as well as they can in very small classes. If there's somebody that's a little sharper, it makes them work a little harder.

Students and teachers indicated that student achievement may be affected by a preponderance of inappropriate behaviors perceived to be associated with larger schools. There was some concern that there may be more drug usage if the school got much larger; however, the statement was made that rumors in the small schools interfere with achievement also.

> Student: There are cliques in little schools but not as bad as it would be in big schools because there would be so many people to group. In smaller schools everybody just kind of sticks together, helps everyone out. When they need help you stick up, you're there for everybody.

> Student: There's a little bit of bad in each school and so when you combine it all together it's just bigger. But remember our school won't be that big. The same things that happen now will happen in a big school. We will have to put locks on our lockers in a bigger school. There's more trust here.

Parents reported that the needs of children change and the capacity to address needs depends on the situation present in the community and the school district. In order to establish a quality education program, each community must articulate the needs of the students and build a program to address those needs. Students noted that thinking of kids and their education first could be sacrificed to basing decisions about education on the effect on businesses in the community. Wiser, in the view of the groups, was to develop and articulate a vision of a quality school; to develop an identity which emphasized the importance of education; and then "sticking to" the program which would achieve the quality desired.

Communication and Relationships

The importance of careful, thorough, and regular communication was expressed by all three respondent groups. It appears that some community people paid little attention to the consortium and consolidation discussions initially. In the beginning, people did not come to the meetings and so lacked accurate information about the plans for consolidation. If they received information solely from the media, students believed that the community received biased or incomplete information. Because of this flawed communication, the students indicated that many community members were not cognizant of what they were voting for in the November 1992 vote. Part of the lack of interest initially may have been that many community people did not believe the change considered would become a reality.

> Teacher: I don't think that most people were even aware of what was happening for two years or so. I think that this whole thing just kind of bubbled and bubbled, you know, simmered on the pot for two years and then when it came to a vote, it boiled over.
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> Parent: I think there was apathy out there, that people probably knew but didn't care anyway. There's a lot of denial.
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> Parent: I think the most important thing is to be informative. People tend to fear what they don't understand, and they'll have more of a tendency to be negative instead of positive if they don't have something concrete in front of them for them to understand before they make a decision. When in doubt vote no; I think is what a lot of people tend to do.

Also, teachers believed that administration and school board members were the only ones involved initially, leaving the community people out of the early discussions. The discussions, it was suggested, must be conducted with the local people, not with the "experts" only. It must be a "grassroots" endeavor. Teachers recognized that they have good administrators in their districts but perceived that even the administrators were not allowed enough participation. (This perception relates to the perceived intentions of the consultant on the reorganization plan and to the disposition of the "experts" in Bismarck.) Interviewees stated that the administrators know the people and the local situation, and they indicated how important it is to have local input into "their own affairs." Because this was a large consolidation attempt (seven districts), the respondents believed that a longer decision making process would have been helpful. At the same time, several teachers stated that it is frustrating when it takes so long to come to a conclusion and stressed the importance of moving on because people will begin to doubt if the discussion "drags on" too long.

> Teacher: Who knows the situation better than those from within, administrators and staff as well. You hate to say anything because it looks like you're just trying to save your job. Even if you have something worth listening to, you don't say anything. So the people that are making the decisions aren't always the best qualified.
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> Student: Consolidation is good, but not with more than three schools because there are too many rivalries. It makes sense when you look at the numbers overall, but it's hard for people to accept.

Teachers and students expressed the perception that students were not sufficiently informed of the direction of the efforts and were rarely asked for their contribution to the discussions. Subsequently, students noted that adults were making all the decisions about things that affected students directly.

> Teacher: We encouraged students to participate but they kept getting shot down. It's really hard to keep building them up to voice their opinions and ask their questions when people don't seem to put any stock or take any interest in what they're saying.
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> Teacher: They're the pinball in the pinball machine, and they are just going to get bounced around. It doesn't matter what they say or what they do. It's not going to have any effect.
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> Student: Somebody's making the decision for you like parents, school boards, and the state.
>
> Student: They had many meetings for adults, but none for the kids. They need to ask the kids what they think and then the adults should talk about it to see whether or not it's feasible. They need to get our input.
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> Student: Give us information; we can understand. We're fairly competent and openminded. Don't underestimate what we can understand. How do they know that we can't understand? We might have some views that they've never thought of. Nobody wants our opinion because they feel we're too young to understand.
>
> Student: They only ask us the colors and the mascot for the school. That's irrelevant to what a school stands for. It's the substance of the school that really counts. They overlook us like we're not there. They think that that's all we're concerned with. We want to know where they're going to ship us and what we're going to be learning.

Students and parents sensed a lack of openmindedness in the discussions. They found that people were set in their own opinions and were unwilling to listen to both sides nor to respect others' opinions. Teachers noticed that many people were negative from the start and just did not want to change. Some remarked that there was also a reluctance to participate; for instance, there seemed to be a fear of business people expressing opinions on the issue of the consolidation vote for fear of repercussions toward their businesses.

> Teacher: Many people went into this thinking that it would go their way. They weren't willing to cooperate or--it was my way or no way.
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> Parent: You always have one or two that are going to try to please everybody. It seems like everybody kind of wants it their way. You always have one or two who are going to be out there fighting every step of the way for what they want versus what the majority of the people want.

One of the greatest challenges, voiced by all three respondent groups, was the difficulty of getting everyone to "like" the idea and to work together for the betterment of the school and the community. Teachers believed that communities need to "get over its civic pride and work for what is best for the county and for our kids." It seems that the "big picture" (county and schools) was difficult for community members to visualize in the consolidation consideration.

> Parent: Consultants called it a super school. That catch phrase, the super school, scared a lot of people. It's too bad it ever appeared in print. A super school really means super money, super dollars, and super amount of kids. No attention was given to students, and it was a bad phrase to use. Kids get lost in the shuffle. Gosh, my kid's going to be a number.

Students and parents indicated that they needed to give the consolidation a chance and to give it time to work. At the same time they wished there had been better communication through the process. Parents saw a definite need for strong leadership which they found was lacking in this process. Students, parents, and teachers stressed the importance of an organized effort involving both the state level and the local level. Parents and teachers found much of the distributed information to be confusing and suggested a need for more direction from the Department of Public Instruction and the state legislature which they argued would have assisted them in decision making. There seemed to be a need, as seen by teachers, to study consolidation beyond Nelson County and to develop a vision for their county. They found it difficult to be the pioneer in a county consolidation effort and at times wished that they could learn from other districts' mistakes rather than to make all the mistakes themselves. They expressed inconsistencies in what they were told and so questioned if "Bismarck knew what they were doing." As one parent stated, "We need someone to blame for our difficulties and that someone could just as well be Bismarck."

> Parent: Legislators did not want to take the bull by the horn and re-district the state. They wanted to give the people the problem of doing it themselves. They won't have to take any old initiatives anymore because there are enough schools that have gone far enough in varying co-ops and so now the legislators are off the hook.

> Parent: I think the consortium legislation plan was a painless way for things to get started. In our case it worked because even if it wasn't the money anymore, we had talked enough, and it takes explaining to each other how you feel. Without visiting with the other schools, there's no way you're going to get together without mandated programs.

> Parent: You need a concrete proposal. If you give too many choices, then you start confusing too many people.

> Parent: I honestly don't think Bismarck knows what should or shouldn't be done. I think they're using us for a guinea pig.

Parents and teachers are seeing progress made in communication among people. People have become more aware of what is going on in the community and school, and more people are attending the meetings. The assumption remains that they have been hearing from the loud minority, while the broad group of supporters has remained fairly quiet. Support groups with members from the various communities have been formed which have provided an opportunity for community members to get to know each other and to share their concerns. This is something that has not occurred extensively over the years. The community is beginning to communicate with legislators and the Department of Public Instruction and at the same time beginning to understand how political the consolidation issue is and how important their own contribution is to the process. There is still the belief that the legislature and the Department of Public Instruction started them in the process and then "left them hanging." The money was scheduled for the five-year period, but recent legislative discussion indicated that cuts could occur. (The legislature did eventually reduce support available.) The interviewees recognized that long-range decisions cannot be made with tentative financial arrangements.

> Teacher: It's been a big eye opener to many people to realize how political the whole situation is. When communities got together to make phone calls, it was amazing for many people to find out that our legislators didn't know what they were voting on.
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> Parent: You felt like you were just kind of shoved into the deep end of the swimming pool and you were told to either sink or swim. It just seemed like there's just a black hole. I mean, what do you do now?
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> Parent: The state just sits there; well, we'll give you this money. Now you've got so many years to come up with the consolidation plan and do it because we're going to cut off consolidation funds. All of a sudden it gets closer to the deadline where they have to do something.
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> Parent: I personally feel that they (legislature) got us started and all of a sudden they're ready to dump us and let us swim on our own. They got sidetracked on another issue and left us out there.

Both teachers and parents observed how important it was to keep communicating with each other and the importance of staying involved in the entire process. It becomes very easy to become complacent and to allow decisions to be made which may not be in the best interest of the community and the school district.

> Parent: After the vote, everyone just relaxed for the winter and kind of went home for a three-month Christmas vacation and forgot all about that we were just starting the process. Now we've started again, and we should never have ceased. We should have kept the information meetings going.
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> Parent: The consolidation vote was too far away from the bond issue vote. Everybody was pumped and ready to move along right after the November vote.

Teacher groups suggested the importance of remaining open to other districts which may be interested in joining the consolidation at a later date, including those districts which voted out of the consortium this time. Parents stated, "We must keep communicating with all school districts in the area."

> Parent: We are going to need one another and right now they don't realize that but that's my feelings on it. Those hard feelings have to end sometime.

The communication between districts has brought new and changed relationships between people within school districts and between the various school districts. Students saw the consolidation discussions assisting communities in talking together which they assume has reduced student rivalries between communities and between school districts. Students sense some uneasiness in being on the same team with past rivals but believe that new friendships will be established as years pass. Students perceive parents as still fighting between communities, and teachers sense that it may take two generations for the adults to get over some of the hard feelings. Some of the old rivalries from many years ago remain, and these individuals are now parents of the school-age children.

> Teacher: If we would have left it up to the kids it would have happened already. As soon as they saw the new class schedule, they were excited right away.
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> Student: Some from some schools will think they're better than others and not realize we're all together as one group. It will take a while to realize that everyone's equal. We'll identify with our group for a while. Some groups will keep their letter jackets for a while and won't accept the new district jacket. We don't want to accept someone else's mascot. It will take a while to adjust to kids from other schools in our classes. We'll all be thrown together. We'll have to learn to get along with everyone else.

All three respondent groups expressed a concern that the consolidation discussion had created havoc within the community and among people and that many feelings have been hurt. Towns have become split, and some have become enemies. Parents are actually fighting among themselves, students reported. Teachers noted that the gossip and rumors have been frustrating, such as those in opposition "poking fun" at the idea of consolidating into one school in a central location and calling it a "barn out in the middle of nowhere." One group of students stated that if they had stayed the way they were, relationships would not have been hurt. Students just wanted people to stick together and wished that individuals could disagree without hating each other. Students and teachers believed that adults hold grudges which tended to tear communities apart. Soon cliques or factions within communities and even between family members begin to form as attitudes move in various directions through the consolidation discussion. Parents stated that the students are the ones getting hurt if these bad feelings persist. As one student stated, "I wish that we could figure out a way for everyone to be happy." One parent observed, however, "Some people will never be happy."

Groups noted that some negative feelings are so intense that there is a fear among teachers and parents that people will be hesitant to patronize other towns' businesses. This will certainly add to the current strife of these struggling communities.

> Teacher: It's kind of like a civil war.
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> Parent: If you hang around with negative people all the time, you're going to be negative. If you hang around positive people, pretty soon you're positive. Positive attitude is a big thing.
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> Parent: I think you're always going to have negative feelings with any group. Just bite your tongue and let everybody say what they want but then not hold it against them. I mean it's got to be worked out. You have to find a common ground to work it out.

Those who voted out of the consortium particularly have experienced strained relationships. A parent stated, "We had the option to stay with it or vote it out whichever way we wanted to, and we voted out and now we are the bad guys." Some commented that they have been "dragged through the mud" and have been receiving hate mail since the vote. Many have lost friendships and have experienced intense reactions over the last six months. Some teachers have observed tension between the Department of Public Instruction and their community.

> Teacher: The other schools voted so overwhelmingly against us it was just like a deflation. It was a cold slap in the face. It really is hard, and it does interfere with your job as a teacher. I'm sure it affects kids too.

Districts in this consortium had been sharing services even before they joined the consortium initiative. Consortium activity expanded and extended the cooperation. Teachers developed working relationships with other professionals in the consortium, and they perceived that the educational program had been enhanced by the cooperation. Some of the teachers believed that the present cooperation between the districts had been going well and were surprised, and they even felt let down, when the other districts would vote to end the present consortium arrangement in favor of the consolidation of the entire county.

Several teachers commented that less parental involvement in the schools may be a consequence of consolidation. Distance may pose a problem for parents to be actively involved in the school. Just those "little chats" with parents will be missed as they stopped by the school on their way to the post office. Students want their parents involved, and they noted that communication with parents is so important to the child's education.

Parents and teachers fear that a larger school may have less of that family feeling that is so evident in small schools. At this time, parents see good working relationships with parents, teachers, and administrators and would not like to see those relationships disintegrate or disappear. Several teachers sensed the possibility of developing new relationships with students and parents but realized it may take time to adjust.

> Teacher: I'm not saying it's bad but I wonder, isn't the idea of new students something that's a little bit scary or it's something that might take a little time for you to get to know your students. There's not a lot of faculty turnover out in our small schools so a lot of them have been in the same building for a long time. You know the town, you know the parents. It would give you a jolt. You'd have to change some of your ways a little bit. New parents, new kids.
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> Student: Here we say hi to everyone. In a big school they'd think you're crazy. Teachers here have known you all your life and really care about you. We're on a first-name basis with our teachers. They know if you're trying to just get by. They know your potential. Kids won't know what to do in a larger school.
>
> Student: There are a lot of fears. Fear of new things, and what's going to happen. Fear of meeting new people, bigger classes and new classes. Fear of losing people, losing jobs. Fear of losing the young teachers, janitors--everyone loves them. Fear of losing family members that are teachers. Fear that I won't make the honor roll or fear of competition.

Students acknowledged that people will accept the consolidation, and all communities will work together in the years to come. There will not be any very small schools, everyone will know everyone, and school spirit will be back. Additionally, teachers said that they have no choice but to accept it, and parents stressed the importance of being a "future looker." It was one teacher's hope that the hard feelings will not be present long which he predicted will be dependent on how future communication is handled. Teachers noted that students can assist in breaking the communication barriers and can assist in bringing communities together because they seem to be adjusting to the situation much better than the adults.

> Student: At first we said no way to the consolidation. We were scared we'd lose our school. It's harder for the older kids to let go of their school and to adjust. As years go by you learn more and accept it. We need to give it a chance. I think everybody's opened up and realized we're all in the same boat. We're all equal.

Community Survival

The decline in rural population has threatened the continued existence of very small rural towns. Schools are seen as an integral part of any community, and the loss of a school presents a threat to the survival of the community. Thus, the possible effects of consolidation of schools on the towns--the original communities--was a major concern of all three respondent groups. At least the participants in the focus groups perceived those connections.

On the other hand, students indicated that consolidated bigger schools may draw more people to the area which could serve to enhance businesses and provide growth for the community. Furthermore, bigger schools were seen as having a more stable future for the school and for the community. Several parents and teachers stated that consolidation could bring in more businesses as economic developers often look for good school systems when considering locations for possible economic development. However, several observed that if a community loses its schools, businesses may suffer because teachers believed that people shop in the area (town) where the school is located.

> Teacher: I am concerned that people would do more of their business in the community where they go to pick up their kids, where they go to school functions.

> Parent: We would hope that what we end up with is the kind of school that other people around us are going to choose to voluntarily attend.

> Student: Consolidation relieves them of the fear that we'll end up being this really tiny school and town. Part of our town will still be around. A lot of the younger families here with kids that aren't even in school yet are relieved that they know that they're not going to have to move off somewhere because the school isn't going to be here. So people will be able to plan a little bit because it looks like there's going to be a school around.

Students saw a possibility of one centrally located school as presenting a positive direction for the county community. If one larger school for the entire county were established, one town would not be "eaten up" by another rival town as may happen if the school were located in one of the towns. Also, if separate buildings in separate towns continue to be used in the consortium, some communities will be upset as communities will continue to "fight over who gets what." Teachers believed that if they consolidate they will still have a school and will still have a voice in it. Parents saw the possibility of a whole new community developing around the new school.

> Parent: It will help communities pull together and just become one big community. If we end up flitting between the schools, we'll still have problems. It'll be a resource for the whole community, and it'll be a resource for each of the five separate little towns. It will be a drawing card for the community as a whole.

> Parent: The location of the seven towns involved is within 25 miles possibly of a good school, and I felt it would've kept all towns alive because--I think it would've brought people, and we would've had a good education system. Cities, I think, were becoming ripe for industry to look to North Dakota if we tell them that our average temperature is 42.

Students and parents found it particularly difficult to think of losing their school. Many families have lived in their present community all there lives, and many parents want their children to attend the same school that they attended. There is a sense of community pride which is difficult to give up; consequently, each community is vying to keep its school. Some older members of the community postulated that the rural school was good enough for them and so is good enough now.

> Teacher: People are by themselves out on the farm, and they're not going to pay taxes for a new school. It's a monetary thing but it's still this feeling of--I went to the one-room schoolhouse and that was good enough for me; it should be good enough for now.

> Teacher: I suppose people in the community, as in all communities, were looking at everything very selfishly saying this is my community, and my school stays open.

> Teacher: People thought either I'm the place where the school will be, or I want it my way. I think getting over the individual civic pride is difficult. Everybody thought their town was the best or their ideas were the best.

> Parent: We're no different than any other small community in that we are so reluctant to give up our facility and our school. Education is being held hostage by a bunch of old mortar and brick buildings.

> Parent: We're going to keep that school no matter what. It's just like a little country church. They're probably running in the red, but we're not going to give it up.

Students stated that the town dies if there is no school and expressed a fear of their town becoming a ghost town. They have seen this happen in their region. On the other hand, teachers stated that it's the town that deteriorates and therefore the school vanishes. Their school is the last thing that their community has, and if they lose the school, that will be the end of their hometown. Schools are the gathering place for community events. Students believed that the school gives the older population a sense of belonging--this is my school and my community. If the hometown school is lost, the fear is that community feeling will diminish. As teachers and students noted, a loss of identity may arise if people live in one town and attend school in another. "Where do you truly belong or live?" One group of students saw their school as still viable and commented that it would make more sense to maintain their present school which they believed would assist in maintaining a stable community.

> Teacher: Small towns maybe lose a little identity when they lose their individual school in that particular town. As soon as you consolidate, you're not just one school, one town anymore.

> Parent: The alternative to consolidation possibly would have been, eventually, there might not have been any schools in any of these communities.

> Student: Towns will die if there's no school, and many people will move away. Older people feel that they can make it longer. They don't know everything. They don't come to meetings and don't hear the information and so don't understand that our school's not going to make it. Some feel that we should keep going until we have to close.

> Student: I think that the school gives them a sense of belonging, because they feel like they're welcome to go to things if the school is here. Everyone in the community goes to the grand march of the prom. They buy maps, and they feel welcome to the prom. A lot of people come to our events and won't come in a bigger school. Community feeling will diminish.

> Student: I hope people won't get bounced back and forth between districts. They won't have pride in themselves; they won't have an identity.

Teachers and students expressed a concern about teachers losing their jobs. This possibility would mean moving out of the region with their families which often include school-age children. This movement would cause a further enrollment decline. As they lose people, friendships are lost, and tax dollars are reduced, all negatively affecting the survival of the community.

The three respondent groups expressed additional concerns about possible consequences of the consolidation effort on the community. They wondered if too many communities were trying to come together.

One group of teachers believed that the co-ops were going well, so they believed that consolidation would be helpful. Another group suggested that it may have been better to continue the ongoing cooperation and thus permit the natural evolution of declining enrollment to take place.

Also, the high school sport teams are such a visible part of each community particularly if the school has a winning team. Students believed that a winning team is very difficult to give up. They stated that good sport teams increase town recognition and consequently people patronize the town businesses. Students also wondered where the competition for sports would originate if all the area schools consolidate and wondered what the new mascot would be. They also worried about the cost of new uniforms and mascot. The local mascot has been around for generations, and the students thought it would be very difficult for their parents and themselves to give it up at this time.

> Student: We want to graduate with our school name, not the new district name. I think we'll start out with both names. We don't want to give up our name totally yet.

Students expressed concern that school spirit may diminish because many of the community people may not attend games that are not in their hometown. It was suggested that consolidation may negatively affect a winning team's community. They may not see the new team as "their" team because the players are no longer their local community kids. Some people may not even want to sit by people from that "other" town at the games. As a consequence, people may lose interest in what is happening at school and may not continue to donate their time and resources to the new school. Students fear that the local community may not see the new team as the "hometown team."

> Student: The 30 and 40 year olds in town can't imagine co-oping with a rival; they'd rather die. Some don't want their kids associating with other district kids.

Teachers indicated that small schools and communities have a lot to offer students. Many parents prefer to send their children to smaller schools to keep them away from the problems of the big city. It was believed that they still have a high quality of life in North Dakota which they believe each community must try to sell to economic developers. Students discussed their intentions of leaving their community upon completion of high school. Communities cannot survive if the youth continue to leave small rural communities for the larger cities.

> Parent: I think that if we get our one central school we may have the advantage of bringing in kids from other places. I read in the paper where some of the urban people are moving out because of the roughness in the schools in the bigger towns. They're moving out, and they are commuting back to their jobs, and their kids are going to a smaller school.

Students also noted that there comes a time when "we just have to accept that our school will close and begin planning for the future." Schools and community have traditions which are difficult to give up. One student stated, "We need to think more of finances and what is best for the community and begin thinking less with our heart." One group of students stated, "If you sometimes give just a little, you may gain a lot." Parents believed that given some time, people will have a more positive outlook which is greatly needed because there is so much negativism in rural America.

> Parent: Consolidation is reality. It's something that people have been trying to avoid. It's been a dirty word for too long and suddenly you need to do it. This should have been a constant transition through all these years instead of such a painful transition these years. One of the biggest advantages I can see in the consolidating process is becoming a larger community. A richer and larger community. Consolidation is just facing the realities of the time.

> Parent: Sometimes we are not really looking toward the future, what it means to kids. It's change and a lot of people don't like change. Change can be a very dirty word out here, and people have to understand that it isn't.

> Student: We need to get people to think about the kids and their education, not just their business, because we are the future. People are thinking too much about themselves. They'd rather have their business better than have kids well educated.

Teachers foresee changes in the community as people make adjustments to consolidation. They saw the possibility of people moving from their farms into a town closer to the new school. They have begun seeing landowners trying to get their land annexed into other school districts and also some recruiting of properties into an adjoining district has been evident. This behavior gives some teachers a sense of people trying to undermine the one-school-one-county concept. Parents and teachers stressed the importance of communities getting together and supporting each other to show the students that they can work together and that they are concerned about their educational welfare. At the same time, they stressed the importance of schools and businesses working together because they both have common interests which must support each other. As one student stated, "Communities will need to support each other, even those who voted out of the consortium, if they expect to survive."

> Teacher: We need to show students what cooperation can do. I think it's a good lesson for the younger kids to learn too from older people working together and cooperating.

As students looked to the future, they sensed a fear of what may happen, a fear of the unknown. It is unclear at this time what will happen. Will we have one centrally located school? If we locate centrally, what will happen to our present school buildings? Teachers commented that it would be hard to see the windows boarded and the buildings vacant. There was a thought that new industry may be interested in the vacant facilities or the buildings may become senior citizen centers which would at least keep the buildings occupied and may even contribute to economic development of the town.

> Parent: If the bond issue goes down we'll probably try it again. In that process we're going to be pitting towns against towns again. That's where the problem's going to be.

There seems to be many unanswered questions in the minds of the students, parents, and teachers. These questions lead to an uncertainty as to the future of the community and the future of the children's education. Five school districts have voted to consolidate, but the important bond issue vote was yet to occur. The passage or defeat of the bond issue may determine future directions for the original five districts. (Note: The initial bond issue for new facilities was defeated in December of 1993.) The contemporaneous passage of the open enrollment legislation is expected by some to affect the enrollment in the consortium as some families may choose to send their children to an adjoining district which may actually be closer to the child's home.

> Parent: I mean, it's a one-school district with supposedly one school but what's in store if the bond issue comes up and then doesn't pass? What is the next issue or what is the next step?

Thus, five districts in Nelson County, North Dakota have elected to chance a new future. Ambiguities remain and fears are quite general. Still, recent trends caused ambiguities and fears too. The story of the Dakota Prairie School District is still evolving.

DISCUSSION

The 1989 School District Boundary Restructuring law in North Dakota created an incredible amount of activity. As many as 140 districts were involved in one way or another; almost 30,000 students were affected. We are persuaded that collaboration makes sense for school districts of the size and character of those in North Dakota; moreover, district officials are learning the potential in collaborating even without incentive payments. We are also persuaded, however, that the School District Boundary Restructuring law accelerated and expanded that collaboration.

In this section, we discuss our perceptions which we believe are warranted by our findings. We discuss the School District Boundary Restructuring laws, the districts, and the implications for policymakers. We conclude with some general discussion and opinion.

The law succeeded if judged by some criteria; it failed if judged by other criteria. If the purpose was to galvanize district officials to consider alternative (more comprehensive, more economical) governance forms, it did that. If, however, the test is formal reorganization of units into single districts, the law failed. The [Fargo] Forum (Gerboth, 1993) headlined "Thumbs down!" The story continued, "North Dakotans who live in shrinking school districts sent a clear message Tuesday: Don't close or consolidate our schools" (p. A1). Negative votes occurred in 32 districts and positive votes occurred in nine districts when patrons from ten consortiums voted on November 16, 1993. Most of the results were overwhelmingly negative. The "yes" votes ranged from 2% (Litchville and Hillsboro) to 85% (Central Cass). In four of the units, no district voted positively (Department of Public Instruction, 1993). Thus, to the date of this writing only two units--Dakota Prairie and Midkota--were reorganizing. What will transpire in an additional two units is not yet clear.

Still, the level of activity, with what many would consider a modest incentive, remains an incredible fact. Moreover, the substance of that activity--program and service enhancements for students, alternative governance schemes considered by district legislators, and emerging concepts of a broader geographic community--was quite profound.

The elements of the law seemed to cause the results intended. For instance, we perceive wisdom in the law in requiring planning. The initial planning efforts created a forum for discussion among an interdistrict group of actors which, for all the rhetoric about cooperation, must occur but may not occur unless there exists a forum. Similarly, the feature of the law which required immediate program or service enhancements was important. This feature ensured visibility to students and to the community. If reorganization were ever to be seriously considered, these enhancements would provide a much more tangible rationale than would efficiencies in governance and administration.

We are less certain about the wisdom of the "carrot and stick" approach contained in the law. The incentive--carrot--clearly accelerated activity. The reorganization vote--stick--may have complicated ordered progress. Enormous attention, time, and resources for coordinators, administrators, and interim boards were necessarily devoted to reorganization planning at the expense of attention to other collaborative activity. Also, the rush to the vote, as it was perceived by some consortia officials, interrupted a more incremental and more leisurely--but more lasting--outcome (Gegelman, 1993). In short, at least in the minds of some actors, the insistence on moving deliberately actually complicated the capacity to progress "naturally," if more incrementally (Gegelman, 1993).

At the district and consortium level, officials fashioned quite similar responses to the opportunity which incentive payments presented them. They structured interim boards with few variations; almost universally they initiated comprehensive curriculum and staff development efforts; even their program and service enhancements and their studies were comparable. Moreover, in general, that which they planned they executed.

One might conclude from these findings that smaller enrollment schools are beset by common problems suggesting similar responses. There was a common need to respond to heightened accreditation criteria. (Almost all consortia expanded their counseling service, for instance.) There was a common desire to provide programs which ranged from nonexistent to thin. (Almost all consortia added modern foreign language and art in some form. Many wished to improve technologies or start a gifted and talented program.) The prospect of collaboration and the possibility of reorganization caused officials to consider similar studies--transportation studies, contracts studies, financial studies.

One might also conclude that it is somehow ironic that consortia used incentive monies to establish or expand modern foreign language or art programs. In many locales such offerings would be seen as typical and ordinary. The absence, or minimal nature, of these programs in the units studied suggests, however, just how difficult it has been to offer comprehensive programming in very small enrollment schools unless cost is not an object.

The absence of certain programs and services, offensive to some, was less noticeable or perceived as less critical by others (Nybladh, 1993). We judge that some persons, including school board members, are not particularly cognizant of opportunities denied some students. It is not so much that they do not care; it is just that a pattern of what is available becomes a pattern of what is acceptable. Moreover, the potentials for expanded programs and services associated with collaboration may not be understood until after collaboration is entered. In this instance, what has long been available is regarded as what is standard.

The consortium program convoked districts of different enrollment sizes. Communication appeared to be easiest when enrollments among partners were about equal, where each or all had about the same circumstance. Communication appeared to be more difficult when smaller enrollment districts personnel talked to their larger enrollment neighbors. Still, the program may have leveled this deliberative forum as much as possible. Worner (1991) has observed that the typical manner in which reorganization gets done is for the smaller enrollment unit to "go broke" and then "hat in hand" seek annexation by a larger neighbor. In this scenario, Worner suggests, all the bargaining power resides with the larger unit. Our observation, thus, is that while some of this disproportion of power may remain in the consortium forum, the discrepancy may also be mitigated somewhat.

As people consorted, they apparently grew in their enthusiasm for cooperation. In fact, we have some evidence that attitudes toward eventual reorganization actually became more positive. Clearly, while administrators urged support for considering interdistrict collaboration initially, board members frequently became the most ardent cheerleaders for the perceived potentials.

Lay leadership, as contrasted with professional leadership, may be especially critical in issues of governance. The laity has a stake and a permanence which is not characteristic (or not perceived to be characteristic) of the professional (Cheney, 1993; Nybladh, 1993; Piper 1993). Following this line of reasoning then, it is especially important in long-term issues--like building a building or in modifying governance--for lay leadership to emerge.

The quality of leadership is always a variable; the variation, both among administrators and boards in the consortium activity, was remarked by several respondents (Decker, 1993; Gates, 1993; Piper, 1993; Sanstead, 1993). Many observed how positively impressed they were with the quality of leadership and depth of dedication which developed in many units.

We believe our study holds some implications for policymakers in other states which wish to encourage interdistrict collaboration. No policy is likely to win broad or enthusiastic support. Liberty, equity, identity, and efficiency values play out in complex and contradictory ways as we consider collaboration or reorganization. Thus, no policy choice can be expected to win wide approbation.

Moreover, patrons evidenced contradictory ideas regarding the proper state role both in the focus group activities and in the survey. Several suggested that fewer strained relationships would have occurred if the state had quite simply mandated the change. (Such action would also provide a distant villain.) More often, patrons accepted--even applauded--the responsibility to craft their own destiny.

Still, that sense was not without a concomitant sense of pain. The pain related to concern regarding how their own communities would fare, the pain related to uncertainties about the future, and the acute pain attending the recognition that strain--between individuals and between communities--resulted from the deliberations and decisions.

This is not to suggest that patrons perceived the state role as it was played out to have been entirely proper. They wished that somehow communication about the issues might have been more extensive and that technical assistance may have been more expert, more consistent, and more available.

Neither is this to suggest that all of the locals were appreciative of all other locals either. Patrons perceived that many came to discussions with hidden agendas; they bemoaned the fact that many stayed out of deliberations until it was too late and that when they finally did participate it was not in a helpful way. Patrons observed that older residents (parents, grandparents) were often less receptive to change than were the younger (student) patrons and that sometimes older persons permitted themselves a denial or delusion mentality regarding the facts, particularly the facts of enrollment erosion and the consequence for programs.

Similarly, it is not clear that alternative visions or alternative approaches to engaging the circumstance were identified nor discussed. In some ways, citizens were asked to contemplate an "all or nothing" approach.

The patrons from whom perceptions were solicited, particularly in the focus groups, made no pretense of political acumen. On the contrary, they would quite likely accept the description as being "just common people wrestling with an issue that affects our town and our school." Without intending any negative judgment nor any criticism, one might characterize many of the respondents as politically unsophisticated. That being the case, the flawed, controversial and complex nature of making a policy choice was not only unfamiliar--to many, it was repugnant.

Perhaps, where an issue is known to be as controversial as the reorganization issue, particular attention needs to be paid to process. Perhaps mechanisms should be employed to alert patrons that "this is a really big deal" together with the acknowledgment that "this is going to be a tough choice."

Elsewhere in this study, we conclude that the creation of "forums" for deliberation was important. The forums took several forms: constituent school boards were obliged to approve an application; administrators, boards, and usually others were obliged to meet to develop a final report; after the reports were approved, an interim board was obliged to meet to conduct the affairs of the consortium and to prepare the reorganization plan. This formal, periodic, focused activity cannot be assumed to occur naturally. Wise policy, in our judgment, would create forums for collaboration to be discussed.

The School District Boundary Restructuring law in North Dakota accelerated and intensified deliberations about interdistrict collaboration. The process is ongoing. To be sure, the latest version of the law has dampened, even impeded, the process. The authors judge, however, that the most recent law will not kill the process because, given the circumstances of rural North Dakota schools, parents, students, and legislators recognize that for both economic and educational reasons, some sort of continuing interdistrict collaboration makes sense.

AFTERWORD

Paul Nachtigal

This final section, unlike the material which precedes it, is not the result of field-based data collection and analysis. Rather, these are observations resulting from a career which has focused on school reform across the country and a deep concern for insuring quality education for all children regardless of where they live. For the past 12 plus years, as Director of the Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory's rural education efforts, I have been privileged to be involved in various initiatives to restructure education in North Dakota. This has included the opportunity to observe, advise, and serve as a neutral third party as the School District Boundary Restructuring legislation has unfolded. Having consulted and written about school consolidation as a policy response to small rural schools, my perceptions concerning this legislation are offered in the hope that they will contribute to the ongoing discourse about how to deal with the future of small rural schools.

The debate about what to do with the "rural school problem" began almost as soon as the country settled on a system of public education. It is a debate that ebbs and flows depending on the availability of resources to support public education and the perceived adequacy of rural school programs to meet society's educational needs. It is a debate which has its roots in the industrial revolution, the primary tenants of which are a relentness need for greater **efficiency** and **effectiveness**. The prescription for moving to this state of nirvana is believed to be more **specialization**, more **standardization**, and more **centralization**. As played out in public education, **specialization** says that a first grade, a second grade, a third grade is better than having three grade levels with one teacher. Or, that having one or two preparations a day at the secondary level is better than three or four preparations. **Standardization** suggests that having all students move through the same curriculum is better than a curriculum that is rooted in the local context. **Centralization**, we have been told, will result in better use of scarce educational dollars if not cost savings. Just look at all the dollars one could save, for instance, if we had half as many highly paid superintendents. And, if we had fewer, more centralized districts education would be more accountable to society. It is this set of beliefs that frames the debate about school consolidation.

These reflections on the School District Boundary Restructuring program are not meant to be critical of any of the players. Policymakers, educators at the state and local level, concerned citizens, all were doing the best they knew how. For the most part, given the rules of the game (to continue the metaphor of the foreword) the results were fairly predictable. However, because of the way the cards were played as the game progressed, there were unintended consequences as well. This section will first reflect on the game as it was played and then speculate about the possibility that the solution to the rural school problem may not be found within the parameters of this particular game. Experience suggests that a different set of rules should be considered.

The Context for H. B. 1507

Three converging sets of forces brought the school consolidation issue to a head in North Dakota. First was the reality of the continuing trend of population decline which translates into declining student enrollments in the public schools. As indicated in the introduction of this document, small towns and small districts, which represent by far the majority of districts in the state, have been particularly hard hit. Secondly was the eroding revenue base for public education which has resulted in tighter budgets. The general state economy and past decisions about how North Dakota finances its schools resulted in the need for budget cuts at all levels. Finally, the cries for school reform, which began more than ten years ago, have not gone away. Instead, they have grown in intensity. If North Dakota is to strive economically, according to the state's visionaries, its schools have to prepare graduates to compete successfully in what is rapidly becoming a world marketplace.

The issues which brought the 1507 legislation to the fore did not just emerge overnight. Rather, their roots were firmly embedded in the state's early development policy. The passage of the Homestead Act, land developers, the railroad companies, and plentiful rainfall in the 1880s resulted in an optimism for the future of the state which in retrospect was not realistic. North Dakota's population skyrocketed fivefold from 30,909 to 190,983 between 1859 and 1890. Bishop John Shanley projected that within his lifetime North Dakota would be as thickly settled as Pennsylvania, which at that time contained over five million people (Wilkins & Wilkins, 1959). When the bishop died in 1909, North Dakota's population was approaching 557,000; it peaked at 681,000 in 1930 and today is 639,000 and still declining. Pennsylvania now has close to 12 million people.

Based on the optimistic projections, early planners created an infrastructure of roads, counties, towns, banks, colleges, schools, churches, and governmental institutions to serve a much greater population than ever materialized. Noting that North Dakota has more infrastructure at every level per capita than any other state, the editor of the Grand Forks Herald noted, "We can't sustain what we've built."

H. B. 1507 was designed to address the "too much" issue for the state's system of public education. Even though much has been done through the years to close one-room schools, in 1989, when the first version of the legislation was passed, the state still had approximately 280 school districts for 117,816 students. The median size high school was less than 70 students. And, as indicated earlier, the majority of the schools in the state were small size by any standards. Finding some way to reduce the educational infrastructure represented a high priority for a growing number of policymakers as well as educators.

The H. B. 1507 Solution

H.B. 1507 represented an innovative policy initiative on the part of the North Dakota state legislature. The intent of the legislation was to address two sets of issues, school consolidation and educational quality. The superintendent of public instruction, with the help of the state board of public education, was responsible for "administer(ing) planning grants and supplemental payments to contiguous school districts or parts of school districts for the purpose of planning and implementing the restructuring of school district boundaries for the purpose of increasing the educational opportunities for children and the sharing of school administrators."

While the legislation and the consequent Department of Public Instruction's School District Boundary Restructuring program seemed fairly straightforward, in the real world of implementation, things became messy. The recommended strategy for the newly formed consortia was to use a significant portion of the incentive money to initiate consortium-wide programs that would improve, or enrich, the educational opportunities for the students of the participating districts. By cooperatively offering these programs, district consortia members would learn to work together. Achieving a comfortable working relationship as a unit would, it was believed, pave the way for district consolidation. The priorities in the early part of the life of the consortia, then, were about "increasing educational opportunities for children." For the most part, in this phase of the 1507 experience, everybody benefited. Each of the schools could take credit for providing students with access to educational experiences that were not previously available. And, while administrators and interim boards were required to engage in many time-consuming meetings, no one had to give up anything.

Agendas at Cross Purposes

About the time sufficient trust among the districts had been created so that they felt comfortable working collaboratively, the other half of the 1507 agenda had to be attended to (i.e., planning and bringing to a vote a plan for restructuring school district boundaries). This shift in priority resulted in less time and resources for nurturing the collaborative programs and at the same time revived all the divisive issues which are traditionally associated with school consolidation. Will our school be closed? How much longer will my children have to ride the bus? Which teachers will lose their jobs? Who will be the new superintendent? Where will the other superintendents go? Will we no longer have our own ball team?

These issues are personal and deeply felt. Could the program have done more to anticipate the surfacing of these issues and assist those involved in working them through? One of those interviewed in this study suggested the need for a longer timeline for collaborative efforts to mature. The reasoning was that if a critical mass of individuals from the participating districts, educators, students, parents, community members **really** understood the value of consortia programs, there would not be the political backlash around redrawing district lines. If this is true, it might well be that the requirements to create a plan for consolidation and submitting that plan to the voters in the third year of operation hindered rather than helped the process of reducing the redundancy of the public education infrastructure.

Only One Right Answer

Another contributing factor to some of the consortia's less than enthusiastic response to the requirement for creating consolidation plans may well have been the position espoused in the Department of Public Instruction's School District Boundary Restructuring Program Guide: The Reorganization Process. The rationale for this guide is firmly rooted in the values and beliefs of the industrial model outlined in the beginning of this section. It represents the industrial, mass production, one-best-system model of education. The only possible conclusion for a consortia following through with the process prescribed is to create a centrally located, single facility system which would have sufficient numbers of students to operate "efficiently and effectively." If this were the only acceptable model for the operation of a reorganized district, it is little wonder that the program failed to sustain the enthusiasm experienced in the early stages of program implementation. Were the newly created efforts to improve and expand learning opportunities for students not valid? Was the only acceptable answer that of bringing students to a central location? Given the scenario in the program guide, some communities would lose their schools. Facilities, which represent a major financial investment of local communities, would be abandoned. New facilities would be needed with no financial assistance on the horizon to build those facilities. Early optimism for the 1507 process too often evolved into growing resistance to moving ahead with the state's consolidation plans.

If the legislature were sincere in its intent to **allow participating schools and communities to make decisions** about how school district restructuring should take place, playing the School District Boundary Restructuring Program Guide card may have done more than anything else to destroy the faith in the program. By this set of rules, once the players had been identified, there was only one logical solution: a large centralized system. If this were really the state's intent, putting the facade of local decision making around the process was at best playing with a stacked deck.

Restructuring the Process of Schooling

On the national scene, school reform was about much more than redrawing school district lines. It was about redesigning the process of schooling. The nation's president had called for the creation of "break-the-mold" schools. The School District Boundary Restructuring Program provided what appeared to be a window of opportunity for consortia schools to begin substantive school restructuring; at least that was the view from the DPI. Consortium schools had access to additional, and to a certain extent, discretionary money. There were also assurances that waivers from certain regulations could be secured if they appeared to stand in the way of school restructuring efforts. So, in addition to learning to consort and the development of a plan for district reorganization, consortia were encouraged to be "visionary," to develop alternative approaches to curriculum and school organization.

While there were examples of a consortium attempting to respond to the DPI's challenge to begin restructuring the process of schooling (e.g., undertake major curriculum revision), by and large the state did not have available the intense, long-term assistance needed to pursue such an effort. Furthermore, here again there was ample opportunity for consortium members to hear mixed signals from the program. On the one hand, there was the call for restructuring the process of schooling. On the other hand, if the consortia took seriously the School District Boundary Restructuring Program Guide, it almost insured that the only thing that could happen was more of the same. The goals of getting class sizes up to state averages, expenditures down to state averages, reducing the number of class preparations a day, and increasing the number of course offerings all reflected and reinforced the status quo (e.g., continuing with the existing one-best system).

One of the temptations of any program is to try to do too much, particularly when resources are tight. The School District Boundary Restructuring program was no exception. Increasing educational opportunities for students, restructuring school district boundaries, and restructuring the process of schooling was too large an agenda (particularly within a three- or even five-year timeframe) for people who were, at the same time, keeping school.

Failure to Stay the Course

Finally, the success of the program (i.e., the number of districts wishing to participate) also contributed to its demise. The number of districts interested in forming consortia far exceeded the original expectations for the program. Policymakers were unwilling or unable to meet the increased demand for funds. Furthermore, the pressure from districts not involved in a consortium became greater. They were interested in getting their fair share of state funding. The district boundary restructuring money represented scarce state resources that might have been used to increase the funding level for all districts. When the legislature decreased, and in some cases cut, funding, the rules of the game changed. Participants lost confidence in the process and their willingness to pursue in good faith the reorganization process. This does not mean, however, that the collaborative arrangements in place will go away. As this study indicates, the interest in cooperative arrangements with neighboring districts remains strong. Perhaps, with the need to focus on a formal reorganization plan moving out of the picture, the level of collaboration may even increase.

Beyond "High-Low-Declare"

The rich comments which emerged from the focus group interviews in the Nelson County case study are representative of the predictable outcome of the game of "high-low-declare." Given the rules of the game, the participants recognized that there were no good choices left. Suppose, just suppose, that North Dakotans had been encouraged to move out of the game where the good choices belong only to large places (the industrial model) and into a more organic, sustainable model for rural education? What follows is an attempt to surface the existing rules of the game (the underlying assumptions) and then for each of these rules to suggest an alternative set of rules, rules that are not yet fully developed, but nevertheless, rules for a different game.

Rule #1

Old Game: Bigger is better, the more courses, the more specialized teachers, the better the education. (Because of declining enrollments and inadequate financial resources, districts were having difficulty playing by this rule [e.g., meeting state accreditation and college entrance requirements].)

> Students, parents, and teachers noted that more courses were needed to prepare students for college or future employment. (Author, p. 46)
>
> We just couldn't afford to offer the curriculum we would've liked to in our school. (Parent, p. 45)
>
> State mandates and college guidelines required additional advanced math, advanced science, foreign language, technology, guidance services, vocational courses, and special services which our district was unable to afford with our declining enrollment. (Student, p. 46)

New Game: Quality education is measured by a number of factors, including the growth of the student's intellectual, physical, social, and emotional skills. (Numbers of courses offered tells little about student growth and less about the conditions under which student growth occurs. It should be noted, however, that measuring and evaluating growth in these areas is a complex, expensive, and time-consuming task, which goes beyond standardized tests.)

> Reformers including John Goodlad (1984) and Theodore Sizer (1992) advocate fewer, more integrated, courses taught for longer periods of time rather than more courses. More and more courses just add to the problem of curriculum fragmentation. Students cannot make the connections needed for application between math and science, math and the social sciences, science and the arts.

Rule #2

Old Game: The role of the school is to prepare students to leave rural areas.

> . . . our students have to be able to come out of our school and be able to go anywhere in the world. (Parent, p. 46)

New Game: Advocates of sustainable education suggest that the responsibility of the school is to provide choices which may include staying in or returning to rural areas.

> In an industrial society, jobs and the good life were to be found in urban centers. One needs only to read a newspaper to know that this is rapidly changing. In a postmodern world, learning the art of living well where we are will become more important. This may mean creating our jobs rather than finding jobs, and, in the words of David Orr, "being an inhabitant" with its sense of care and rootedness rather than "being a resident," a temporary occupant investing little in our community. (Orr, 1992, p. 130)

Rule #3

Old Game: Small school education is, by definition in an industrial society that emphasizes bigness, "second best." Large schools mean better student performance.

> Most of the high school kids that come out of these schools now are at such a disadvantage because they basically have a year to make up unless they're absolutely exceptional students. (Parent, p. 46)

> Achievement will increase when schools consolidate because along with larger numbers comes greater competition among students. (Author, p. 49)

> They aren't challenged to do as well as they can in very small classes. If there's somebody that's a little sharper, it makes them work harder. (Teacher, p. 49)

New Game: There is a growing body of evidence that small/rural school students are not educationally disadvantaged but perform better than their urban counterparts.

> It's easy in a big school to slough off. Nobody will care if I flunk out--what's the difference? (Student, p. 47)

> . . . states with the smallest average school sizes, around 250 students, are North Dakota, Montana, Nebraska, and Wyoming. . . . they have the highest average achievement. States with the largest schools, Florida and Hawaii, have low achievement. (Walberg, 1992, p. 129)

> Generally, it appears that the smaller the district, the higher the achievement when the SES and per-student expenditures are taken into account. Why should small districts do well? Superintendent and central staff awareness of citizen and parent preferences, the absence of bureaucratic layers and administrative complexity, teacher involvement in decision making, and close home-school relations--these may account for the apparent efficiency of small school districts. (Walberg, 1988, p. 19)

Rule #4

Old Game: Larger schools provide more co-curricular opportunities and participation.

> Consolidation could provide additional opportunities for students through expended co-curricular activities. These additional sports and activities would provide diverse opportunities for students. More students could be involved with a greater variety of choices. (Author, p. 46)

New Game: Larger schools mean fewer, not more, opportunities for co-curricular involvements. (If five schools consolidate there will be one, not five class presidents; one, not five student council chairs; five, not 25 starting basketball players.)

> In small schools, students are not redundant. (Barker, 1964, p. 196)

> When few students are available for school activities, students who would be marginal in a large school are noticed and encouraged to participate to fill slots on the cheerleaders, and basketball teams for example. With such participation, as more recent research confirms, loneliness, deviance, and drug use declines, while engagement, achievement, and concern for others rises. (Walberg, 1992, p. 125)

Rule #5

Old Game: Larger schools are more efficient to operate.

> . . . a single unit will permit some economies of scale permitting the unit to become more cost effective. (Author, p. 48)

New Game: Small schools are equally as efficient, if not more so, when considering the student outcomes per dollar invested.

> Evidence in favor of cost savings associated with larger size schools and school districts is, at best, ambiguous. In the instance of rural schools, the setting where consolidation is most dramatic, it is exceedingly unclear that efficiency favors large organizations. (Guthrie, 1980, p. 126)

Rule #6

Old Game: Economic costs are the only ones that matter in education planning.

> All this discussion comes down to dollars. (Parent, p. 48)

> We need to think more of finances and what is best for the community and begin thinking less with our heart. (Student, p. 59)

New Game: Social costs are equally, if not more important, than economic costs.

> Towns have become split, and some have become enemies. (Author, p. 54)

> There seemed to be a fear of business people expressing opinions on the issue of the consolidation vote for fear of repercussions toward their businesses. (Author, pp. 51, 54, 58)

> Students perceive parents as still fighting between communities, and teachers sense that it may take two generations for the adults to get over some of the hard feelings. Some of the old rivalries from many years ago remain. (Author, p. 53)
>
> It's kind of like civil war. (Teacher, p. 54)
>
> Some (parents) commented that they have been "dragged through the mud" and have been receiving hate mail since the vote. Many have lost friendships and have experienced intense reactions over the last six months. (Author, p. 54)

Rule #7

Old Game: Economic development comes from the outside.

> Students indicated that consolidated bigger schools may draw more people to the areas which could serve to enhance businesses and provide growth for the community. (Author, p. 56)
>
> . . . several parents and teachers stated that consolidation could bring in more businesses as economic developers often look for good school systems when considering locations for possible economic development. (Author, p. 56)

New Game: Smokestack chasing (e.g., attracting industry from the outside) is obsolete as an economic development strategy.

> . . . a broader notion of economic development emphasizing job creation and closely tied to education investments, has begun to occupy a position alongside the industrial relocation strategy. (Hobbs, 1987, p. 20)
>
> Localities need to recognize the trend away from the location of branch plants in rural areas and to engage in self-development activities--locally initiated, locally controlled and at least partially locally financed efforts at generating jobs and incomes. (Flora, 1991, p. 55)

Rule #8

Old Game: What's best for the community, for the state, is known only by the "experts."

> Policymakers tend to initiate by imagining what the best possible structure would be and then mandating resources, organization and rules consistent with it. (Elmore, 1988, p. 60)

New Game: Constructive change is a long-term collaborative process involving "experts at all levels," policymakers, administrators, practitioners, and community leaders.

> . . . policy is used less to mandate resource allocation, structures, and rules and more to initiate development. Policymakers can acknowledge this fact more explicitly . . . by charging practitioners with the development of solutions, rather than mandating imaginary systems that take long periods of time to adjust to reality. (Elmore, 1988, p. 60)

Rule #9

Old Game: Primary concern is for preserving territoriality.

> The process of making "public decisions" has come to a stalemate. Each (side) has achieved veto power over a piece of any possible solution, and no one has the power to solve the problem. Thus, in an oddly self-destructive conflict, the parts wage war against the whole. And the conflict will destroy us unless we get hold of it. (Gardner, 1980)

New Game: Concern for territoriality gives way to the pursuit of cooperation and search for "common ground."

> Wallace Stegner urges the West to learn that "cooperation, not rugged individualism" is the path to its future.
>
> If the total privatization of values is at or near the root of the problem, then some conception of shared or communal values must be part of the solution. . . . In turning to the idea of shared values, we will move from "territoriality" to "common ground." (Kemmis, 1990, p. 62)

Summary

Public education in North Dakota has been changed by the School District Boundary Restructuring program. And, while it has not reduced the public education infrastructure as many had hoped, school districts are now looking to their neighbors for ways to work together in order to provide quality education in a cost effective way. The extent to which districts elected to participate in a policy initiative which gave them some voice in how that initiative would play out locally provides a lesson to which policymakers might well attend. Real participatory approaches to change are more likely to garner positive action than "top-down" mandates. What also seems obvious is that issues that are as complex and politically volatile as school district consolidation and restructuring the process of schooling require a much longer time to resolve than the legislative process is usually ready to accommodate.

North Dakota's political and educational leadership are to be commended for pursuing an innovative approach to educational policy. The spirit of the legislation was to allow local knowledge and ownership to surface. It provided an arena where some of the new rules began to surface. North Dakota could be an exemplar for other states by finding ways to keep alive the energy and creativity which 1507 unleashed.

APPENDIX

the Grand Forks air force base and the Minot air force base, pursuant to this chapter:

a. The school districts providing education to students residing on a military installation must enter into an agreement regarding the provision of education to those students. The agreement must be approved by the state board of public school education. School districts entering into the agreement must take into consideration current and potential revenues and losses that may occur as the result of the agreement; and

b. The state board of public school education must receive approval from the United States secretary of education regarding the formation of the proposed school district.

Source: S.L. 1989, ch. 204, § 3.

Effective Date.

This section became effective March 28, 1989.

CHAPTER 15-27.6

SCHOOL DISTRICT BOUNDARY RESTRUCTURING

Section
15-27.6-01. School district restructuring — Rules.
15-27.6-02. School district restructuring — Planning grant — Final report.
15-27.6-03. Interim district board.
15-27.6-04. Interim district board — Powers and duties.

Section
15-27.6-05. State aid — Planning grants — Supplemental pupil payments.
15-27.6-06. Assistance from superintendent of public instruction.

15-27.6-01. School district restructuring — Rules. The superintendent of public instruction, with assistance from the state board of public school education, shall adopt rules under chapter 28-32 for the purpose of administering planning grants and supplemental payments to contiguous school districts or parts of school districts for the purposes of planning and implementing the restructuring of school district boundaries for the purpose of increasing the educational opportunities of students and the sharing of school administrators. The superintendent of public instruction, if requested, shall provide assistance to school districts in the development and implementation of a plan for the restructuring of contiguous school districts. The superintendent of public instruction may provide other services if requested by the school districts. The plan and any subsequent amendments must be adopted by a majority vote of the membership of each of the participating school boards and the state board of public school education prior to becoming eligible to receive supplemental pupil payments.

Source: S.L. 1989, ch. 218, § 2.

Effective Date.

The act which added this chapter became effective April 28, 1989.

Note.

Section 8 of chapter 218, S.L. 1989, provides:

"**Report to the legislative council and legislative assembly.** The superintendent of public instruction shall report to the legislative council interim committee on education regarding the status of the planning grants and the known number of interim school districts and to the legislative assembly at the organizational session in 1990 regarding the status of planning grants for the biennium and the number of school districts that are implementing the plans developed under the planning grants during the second year of the 1989-91 biennium."

Section 11 of chapter 218, S.L. 1989, provides:

"**LEGISLATIVE INTENT.** If school districts to the east and west of North Dakota highway 83 qualify for the pilot project, it is the intent of the legislative assembly that at least one pilot project be located on the east side of North Dakota highway 83 and at least one pilot project be located on the west side of North Dakota highway 83."

15-27.6-02. School district restructuring — Planning grant — Final report.

1. Upon receipt of a request for a planning grant from a consortium of school districts whose school boards have by majority vote approved participation in a planning grant to study the restructuring of school boundaries and upon approval of the state board of public school education, the superintendent of public instruction shall provide financial assistance and, if requested, technical assistance.
2. The planning grant must include the study and analysis of:
   a. Past and projected enrollment trends and other student demographic characteristics and special service needs.
   b. School facilities.
   c. Student transportation systems.
   d. Financial resources available from local, state, and federal sources.
   e. Personnel characteristics, capabilities, and assignments.
   f. Other factors as deemed important.
3. The final report must include:
   a. An analysis of data studied, the findings, and recommendations.
   b. A plan for the restructuring of the participating school districts.
   c. A time line for the implementation of the plan.
   d. Plans for the establishment of an interim district board to oversee the implementation of the plan.
4. Upon approval of the preliminary plan for the restructuring of the participating school districts by a majority vote of the school board members and the state board of public school education, the superintendent of public instruction shall make available supplemental payments as provided in section 15-27.6-05.

Source: S.L. 1989, ch. 218, § 3.

15-27.6-03. Interim district board. The interim district board is composed of at least one school board member appointed by the school board of each participating school district. Each representative must be a member of the school board of the school district of the appointing school board. The representative shall serve at the pleasure of the appointing school board and may be recalled by a majority vote of the appointing board. Each board member's term expires at the end of that member's term on the local school board. The board shall adopt bylaws for the conduct of its business and is governed, unless specifically provided otherwise, by the laws applicable to school districts.

Source: S.L. 1989, ch. 218, § 4.

15-27.6-04. Interim district board — Powers and duties.

1. The interim district board shall:
   a. Coordinate the programs and services according to the terms of the approved plan for school district restructuring.
   b. Implement the plan for delivering education services.
   c. Implement methods for sharing administrative and management services. For the purposes of this subdivision an administrator includes:
      (1) Executive administrators, which include the superintendent and such assistants as deputy, associate, and assistant superintendents who perform activities with respect to the general direction and management of the affairs of the local school district.
      (2) Business administrators, which includes personnel associated with activities concerned with purchasing, paying for, transporting, exchanging, and maintaining goods and services for the school district.
   d. Develop a process for school districts or parts of school districts to join or withdraw from the projected restructured school district.
   e. Develop procedures for a pupil who is a resident of a member district to enroll in programs or courses offered by another member district and the sharing of costs.
   f. Establish methods for involving parents and other constituents of the participating school districts.
   g. Review the plan annually and propose necessary amendments to the member school districts and to the state board of public school education for adoption by a majority vote of each body.
   h. Submit an annual report to the participating school boards of the participating school districts at their annual meetings in July of each year and to the superintendent of public instruction on the same date.

Source: S.L. 1989, ch. 218, § 5.

15-27.6-05. State aid — Planning grants — Supplemental pupil payments.

1. Payments for approved planning grants must be made quarterly for a period not to exceed one year.

2. Each participating school district is entitled to receive state aid for a period not to exceed three years in the amount of from one hundred twenty-five to one hundred sixty-five dollars per full-time equivalent pupil in average daily membership the previous year in the participating school districts. The superintendent of public instruction shall distribute the payments pursuant to section 15-40.1-05. Prior to being entitled to the maximum payment under this subsection, a participating school district must have one or more administrators jointly assigned and the participating districts' plan must be attempting to improve the quality of instruction as determined by the superintendent of public instruction.
3. Upon adoption of the restructuring plan by the voters of the participating school districts pursuant to chapter 15-27.3, the newly formed school district is eligible to receive the supplemental pupil payment for an additional period of two years following the effective date of the reorganization based on the number of full-time equivalent students in average daily membership during the year prior to the effective date of the reorganization.

Source: S.L. 1989, ch. 218, § 6.

15-27.6-06. Assistance from superintendent of public instruction. The superintendent of public instruction may hire a state school district restructuring coordinator and assistants as may be necessary to assist school districts in the planning, organizing, and implementation of the plan to restructure school districts.

Source: S.L. 1989, ch. 218, § 7.

CHAPTER 15-28

PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT ELECTIONS

Section
15-28-01. School board members, number, and terms — Elections to be at large — Reorganized districts vote once.
15-28-02. Rural members of school board.
15-28-03. Annual and special elections — When held — Officers elected — Terms — Optional joinder with city election or primary election.
15-28-04. Election precincts, polling places, and officers.

Section
15-28-06. Annual and special elections — Notice.
15-28-07. Notice of election — Form.
15-28-09. Election — Candidates — Ballots — Stickers.
15-28-10. Duties of election officials — Other statutes applicable.
15-28-11. Publication of school board proceedings — Electorate to decide biennially.

terms provided in the agreement or for as long as both school districts continue to operate and the Grand Forks air force base contracts for full educational services from the Grand Forks public school district.

2. Before the state board of public school education requests that a school district be established pursuant to this chapter on the Minot air force base, the Glenburn public school district and the Minot public school district must enter into an agreement regarding the provision of education to the students residing on the air force base. The agreement must be approved by the state board of public school education. The Minot public school district and the Glenburn public school district, in entering into an agreement, must take into consideration current and potential revenues, including current and potential revenues from property taxes, in lieu of property taxes, and federal and state funds that are distributed to school districts based on census, and losses that may occur as a result of the agreement. The state board of public school education must receive approval from the United States secretary of education prior to the formation of the proposed school district.
3. Before the state board of public school education requests that a school district be established on a military installation other than the Grand Forks air force base and the Minot air force base, pursuant to this chapter:
    a. The school districts providing education to students residing on a military installation must enter into an agreement regarding the provision of education to those students. The agreement must be approved by the state board of public school education. School districts entering into the agreement must take into consideration current and potential revenues and losses that may occur as the result of the agreement; and
    b. The state board of public school education must receive approval from the United States secretary of education regarding the formation of the proposed school district.

Source: S.L. 1989, ch. 204, § 3.

CHAPTER 15-27.6

SCHOOL DISTRICT BOUNDARY RESTRUCTURING

Section

15-27.6-01. School district restructuring — Rules.
15-27.6-02. School district restructuring — Planning grant — Final report.
15-27.6-03. Interim district board.
15-27.6-04. Interim district board — Powers and duties.
15-27.6-05. State aid — Planning grants — Supplemental pupil payments.
15-27.6-06. Assistance from superintendent of public instruction.
15-27.6-07. School district reorganization — Option to withdraw by annexing to another district — Hearing.
15-27.6-08. Determination and adjustment of property, assets, debts, and liabilities among districts — Determination of tax levy — Appeals.
15-27.6-09. County committee review of proposal — Public meeting required — Submission of approved proposal to state board.
15-27.6-10. Approved proposal received by county superintendent — Special election called — Formation of new district.
15-27.6-11. Supplemental pupil payments.

15-27.6-01. School district restructuring — Rules. The superintendent of public instruction, with assistance from the state board of public school education, shall adopt rules under chapter 28-32 for the purpose of administering planning grants and supplemental payments to contiguous school districts or parts of school districts for the purposes of planning and implementing the restructuring of school district boundaries for the purpose of increasing the educational opportunities of students and the sharing of school administrators. The superintendent of public instruction, if requested, shall provide assistance to school districts in the development and implementation of a plan for the restructuring of contiguous school districts. The superintendent of public instruction may provide other services if requested by the school districts. The plan and any subsequent amendments must be adopted by a majority vote of the membership of each of the participating school boards and the state board of public school education prior to becoming eligible to receive supplemental pupil payments.

Source: S.L. 1989, ch. 218, § 2.

15-27.6-02. School district restructuring — Planning grant — Final report.

1. Upon receipt of a request for a planning grant from a consortium of school districts whose school boards have by majority vote approved participation in a planning grant to study the restructuring of school boundaries and upon approval of the state board of public school education, the superintendent of public instruction shall provide financial assistance and, if requested, technical assistance.
2. The planning grant must include the study and analysis of:
   a. Past and projected enrollment trends and other student demographic characteristics and special service needs.
   b. School facilities.
   c. Student transportation systems.
   d. Financial resources available from local, state, and federal sources.
   e. Personnel characteristics, capabilities, and assignments.
   f. Other factors as deemed important.
3. The final report must include:
   a. An analysis of data studied, the findings, and recommendations.
   b. A plan for the restructuring of the participating school districts.
   c. A time line for the implementation of the plan.
   d. Plans for the establishment of an interim district board to oversee the implementation of the plan.
4. Upon approval of the preliminary plan for the restructuring of the participating school districts by a majority vote of the school board members and the state board of public school education, the superintendent of public instruction shall make available supplemental payments as provided in section 15-27.6-05.

Source: S.L. 1989, ch. 218, § 3.

15-27.6-03. Interim district board. The interim district board is composed of at least one school board member appointed by the school board of each participating school district. Each representative must be a member of the school board of the school district of the appointing school board. The representative shall serve at the pleasure of the appointing school board and may be recalled by a majority vote of the appointing board. Each board member's term expires at the end of that member's term on the local school board. The board shall adopt bylaws for the conduct of its business and is governed, unless specifically provided otherwise, by the laws applicable to school districts.

Source: S.L. 1989, ch. 218, § 4.

15-27.6-04. Interim district board — Powers and duties. The interim district board shall:

1. Coordinate the programs and services according to the terms of the approved plan for school district restructuring.
2. Implement the plan for delivering education services.
3. Implement methods for sharing administrative and management services. For the purposes of this subdivision an administrator includes:
   a. Executive administrators, which include the superintendent and such assistants as deputy, associate, and assistant superintendents who perform activities with respect to the general direction and management of the affairs of the local school district.
   b. Business administrators, which includes personnel associated with activities concerned with purchasing, paying for, transporting, exchanging, and maintaining goods and services for the school district.
4. Develop a process for school districts or parts of school districts to join the projected restructured school district or withdraw from the projected restructured school district by annexing to another school district.
5. Develop procedures for a pupil who is a resident of a member district to enroll in programs or courses offered by another member district and the sharing of costs.
6. Establish methods for involving parents and other constituents of the participating school districts.
7. Review the plan annually and propose necessary amendments to the member school districts and to the state board of public school education for adoption by a majority vote of each body.

8. Submit an annual report to the participating school boards of the participating school districts at their annual meetings in July of each year and to the superintendent of public instruction on the same date.
9. Provide for the training of professional staff employed within the consortium in preparation for assuming positions in the reorganized district.

Source: S.L. 1989, ch. 218, § 5; 1991, ch. 170, §§ 3, 4.

Effective Date.
The 1991 amendment of this section by sections 3 and 4 of chapter 170, S.L. 1991, became effective on July 17, 1991, 90 days after filing, pursuant to N.D. Const., Art. IV, § 13.

Note.
The subdivisions of this section were renumbered in 1991.

15-27.6-05. State aid — Planning grants — Supplemental pupil payments.

1. Payments for approved planning grants must be made quarterly for a period not to exceed one year.
2. Each interim district board is entitled to receive state aid for a period not to exceed three years in the amount of from one hundred twenty-five to one hundred sixty-five dollars for each full-time equivalent pupil in average daily membership the previous year in the participating school districts. The interim district board shall have the option to receive the amount equivalent to its third-year payment over a two-year period. This extended payment request must be contained in the consortium's third-year cooperative plan. The superintendent of public instruction shall distribute the payments to the interim district boards in the same manner provided in section 15-40.1-05 for the distribution of payments to school districts. Prior to being entitled to the maximum payment under this subsection, a participating school district must have one or more administrators jointly assigned and the participating districts' plan must be attempting to improve the quality of instruction as determined by the superintendent of public instruction.

Source: S.L. 1989, ch. 218, § 6; 1991, ch. 170, § 5.

Effective Date.
The 1991 amendment of this section by section 5 of chapter 170, S.L. 1991, became effective on July 17, 1991, 90 days after filing, pursuant to N.D. Const., Art. IV, § 13.

15-27.6-06. Assistance from superintendent of public instruction. The superintendent of public instruction may hire a state school district restructuring coordinator and assistants as may be necessary to assist school districts in the planning, organizing, and implementation of the plan to restructure school districts.

Source: S.L. 1989, ch. 218, § 7.

15-27.6-07. School district reorganization — Option to withdraw by annexing to another district — Hearing. The interim district board shall develop a proposal for the reorganization of the participating districts. The interim district board shall include all land located within the boundaries of the participating school districts in the reorganization proposal; provided, however, that a participating school district or part of a school district may be excluded from the reorganization proposal if the school district or part of the school district annexes to another school district. Any school district or part of a school district within the consortium may annex to another school district at any time. The interim district board shall hold a public hearing on the advisability of any proposal by the board for the reorganization of school districts. Notice of the hearing must be given by publishing a notice in the official county newspaper in each county affected by the proposed reorganization at least fourteen days prior to the date of any hearing. At the hearing, the interim district board shall make available to the public information about the value and amount of all school property and all bonded and other indebtedness of each school district involved in the proposed reorganization. At the hearing, the interim district board must make available to the public information regarding the curriculum offerings and staffing requirements to be implemented in the proposed reorganized school district. At the hearing, the board shall receive testimony offered by any person or school district interested in any reorganization proposal of the board. The testimony and documentary evidence considered by the board must include any information regarding the factors listed in subsections 1 through 15 of section 15-27.3-05. The board shall nake specific findings with reference to ach of the factors to which testimony or iocumentary evidence is directed in proeedings before the board. The board shall ceep a record of all hearings on the reorganization of school districts and of all findngs and terms of adjustment of property, lebts, and liabilities among the districts nvolved and shall submit this information o the county committee at the time of subnitting a proposal.

Source: S.L. 1991, ch. 170, § 6.

Effective Date.

This section became effective on July 17, 1991, 90 days after filing, pursuant to N.D. Const., Art. IV, § 13.

15-27.6-08. Determination and adjustment of property, assets, debts, and liabilities among districts — Determination of tax levy — Appeals. After the hearing, the interim district board shall determine the value and amount of all school property and all bonded and other indebtedness of each school district affected by the reorganization proposal and shall consider the amount of outstanding indebtedness and make an equitable adjustment of all property, assets, debts, and liabilities among the districts involved. The interim district board shall also determine the amount necessary to meet the expenses of the proposed reorganized district and shall propose a tax levy sufficient to meet those expenses. The interim district board shall submit the proposed tax levy to the county committee and the state board as part of the reorganization proposal, and if approved by the county committee and the state committee, the proposed tax levy must be included as part of the proposal and submitted to the electors of the proposed new district. Tax levies submitted as part of a reorganization proposal that is approved are not subject to mill levy limitations provided by law. Appeals on the question of adjustment of property, debts, and liabilities among the districts may be made as provided in section 15-27.3-07.

Source: S.L. 1991, ch. 170, § 7.

Effective Date.

This section became effective on July 17, 1991, 90 days after filing, pursuant to N.D. Const., Art. IV, § 13.

15-27.6-09. County committee review of proposal — Public meeting required — Submission of approved proposal to state board. After the hearing required by section 15-27.6-07, the interim district board shall make necessary changes to the proposal and submit the proposal to the county committee for its approval. The county committee shall review the proposal at a public meeting. The county committee shall publish in the county newspaper of any county affected by the reorganization proposal notice of the meeting at least fourteen days before the meeting. If a majority of the members of the county committee approve the proposal, the county committee shall submit the proposal to the state board for approval or disapproval. If the school districts involved in the reorganization proposal are situated in more than one county, a special committee composed of not fewer than three members of the county committee, selected by the committee, of the county encompassing the major portion of each school district shall review the proposal. The proposal must be submitted to each county committee for its approval. If the reorganization proposal is approved by a majority of the members of at least one-half of the county committees, or the members of one or more of the special committees fail or refuse to meet with the committee or committees from other counties, the county superintendent of the county in which the largest number of pupils who would be affected by the proposed new district reside shall submit the reorganization proposal to the state board for approval or disapproval. Approval of the reorganization proposal by the state board has the same effect as approval by all the county committees. If none of the county committees approves the reorganization proposal, it may not be presented to the state board for review. If the school districts are situated in more than one county but the major portions of those school districts are situated in the same county, the county committee of that county shall consider the matter.

Source: S.L. 1991, ch. 170, § 8.

Effective Date.

This section became effective on July 17, 1991, 90 days after filing, pursuant to N.D. Const., Art. IV, § 13.

15-27.6-10. Approved proposal received by county superintendent — Special election called — Formation of new district.

1. Upon receipt from the state board of an approved proposal for the reorganization of school districts, the

county superintendent, after consulting with the interim district board, shall call a special election as provided in section 15-27.3-08.

2. If a majority of electors residing within each school district vote in favor of the formation of the new district, the county superintendent shall make the proper adjustments and perform all necessary duties as provided in subsection 6 of section 15-27.3-08.
3. If fewer than all of the districts vote in favor of a new district, any contiguous districts voting in favor of the proposal shall form a new district if the new district would qualify to receive the payments provided for in section 15-27.6-11 and if approved by the state board. Any contiguous districts voting in favor of forming a new district, but that would not qualify for payments under section 15-27.6-11, may form a new district. To form a new district, the board members of the interim district board who represent the contiguous districts involved shall make a determination and adjustment of property, assets, debts, and liabilities of the districts as provided in section 15-27.3-04 and make a determination of tax levy as provided in section 15-27.3-06 and submit a new proposal to the state board for approval. If the state board approves the plan, the county superintendent shall make the proper adjustment of the property, assets, debts, and liabilities as provided in the proposal and organize and establish the districts and, in doing so, shall perform all other necessary duties as provided in subsection 6 of section 15-27.3-08.
4. If a school district does not vote in favor of forming a new school district, any part of that school district excluded from the reorganization proposal pursuant to section 15-27.6-07 may either proceed with annexation or remain a part of that school district.

Source: S.L. 1991, ch. 170, § 9.

Effective Date.

This section became effective on July 17, 1991, 90 days after filing, pursuant to N.D. Const., Art. IV, § 13.

15-27.6-11. Supplemental pupil payments.

1. A newly formed district is eligible to receive the supplemental pupil payment provided for in section 15-27.6-05 for an additional period of two years following the effective date of the reorganization based on the number of full-time equivalent students in average daily membership during the year prior to the effective date of the reorganization if the newly formed district:
   a. Encompasses at least seven hundred square miles [181299.168 hectares], enrolls at least six hundred students, and, prior to the reorganization, consisted of three contiguous school districts, each of which operated grades kindergarten through twelve programs or grades one through twelve programs;
   b. Prior to the reorganization, consisted of at least six contiguous school districts, four of which operated grades kindergarten through twelve programs or grades one through twelve programs; or
   c. Either enrolls a minimum of six hundred students or encompasses at least seven hundred square miles [181299.168 hectares], and, prior to the reorganization, consisted of four or five school districts, each of which operated grades kindergarten through twelve programs or grades one through twelve programs.
2. Sections 15-27.3-12 through 15-27.3-15 and 15-27.3-17 through 15-27.3-21 apply to school district reorganizations under this chapter.
3. A newly formed school district that was approved to receive a planning grant prior to July 17, 1991, is eligible to receive the additional supplemental pupil payments.

Source: S.L. 1991, ch. 170, § 10.

Effective Date.

This section became effective on July 17, 1991, 90 days after filing, pursuant to N.D. Const., Art. IV, § 13.

CHAPTER 15-27.7

SCHOOL DISTRICT COOPERATIVE ARRANGEMENT

Section

15-27.7-01. School district cooperative arrangements — Rules.

public school district must enter into an agreement regarding the provision of education to the students residing on the air force base. The agreement must be approved by the state board of public school education. The Minot public school district and the Glenburn public school district, in entering into an agreement, must take into consideration current and potential revenues, including current and potential revenues from property taxes, in lieu of property taxes, and federal and state funds that are distributed to school districts based on census, and losses that may occur as a result of the agreement. The state board of public school education must receive approval from the United States secretary of education prior to the formation of the proposed school district.

3. Before the state board of public school education requests that a school district be established on a military installation other than the Grand Forks air force base and the Minot air force base, pursuant to this chapter:
   a. The school districts providing education to students residing on a military installation must enter into an agreement regarding the provision of education to those students. The agreement must be approved by the state board of public school education. School districts entering into the agreement must take into consideration current and potential revenues and losses that may occur as the result of the agreement; and b. The state board of public school education must receive approval from the United States secretary of education regarding the formation of the proposed school district.

Source: S.L. 1989, ch. 204, § 3.

CHAPTER 15-27.6

SCHOOL DISTRICT BOUNDARY RESTRUCTURING

Section
15-27.6-01. School district restructuring — Rules.
15-27.6-02. School district restructuring — Planning grant — Final report.
15-27.6-02.1. Preliminary plan — One or more reorganized districts.
15-27.6-03. Interim district board.
15-27.6-04. Interim district board — Powers and duties.
15-27.6-05. State aid — Planning grants — Supplemental pupil payments.
15-27.6-06. Assistance from superintendent of public instruction.
15-27.6-06.1. Formation of additional consortia.

Section
15-27.6-07. School district reorganization — Option to withdraw by annexing to another district — Hearing.
15-27.6-08. Determination and adjustment of property, assets, debts, and liabilities among districts — Determination of tax levy — Appeals.
15-27.6-09. County committee review of proposal — Public meeting required — Submission of approved proposal to state board.
15-27.6-10. Approved proposal received by county superintendent — Spe-

Section
cial election called — Formation of new district.
15-27.6-11. Additional supplemental student payments.
15-27.6-12. Application of sections.

Section
15-27.6-13. Definitions.
15-27.6-14. Recall rights — Consortia — Teacher contracts not renewed.

15-27.6-01. School district restructuring — Rules. The superintendent of public instruction, with assistance from the state board of public school education, shall adopt rules under chapter 28-32 for the purpose of administering planning grants and supplemental payments to contiguous school districts or parts of school districts for the purposes of planning and implementing the restructuring of school district boundaries for the purpose of increasing the educational opportunities of students and the sharing of school administrators. The superintendent of public instruction, if requested, shall provide assistance to school districts in the development and implementation of a plan for the restructuring of contiguous school districts. The superintendent of public instruction may provide other services if requested by the school districts.

Source: S.L. 1989, ch. 218, § 2; 1993, ch. 182, § 1.

15-27.6-02. School district restructuring — Planning grant — Final report.

1. Upon receipt of a request for a planning grant from a consortium of school districts whose school boards have by majority vote approved participation in a planning grant to study the restructuring of school boundaries and upon approval of the state board of public school education, the superintendent of public instruction shall provide financial assistance and, if requested, technical assistance.
2. The planning grant must include the study and analysis of:
    a. Past and projected enrollment trends and other student demographic characteristics and special service needs.
    b. School facilities.
    c. Student transportation systems.
    d. Financial resources available from local, state, and federal sources.
    e. Personnel characteristics, capabilities, and assignments.
    f. Other factors as deemed important.
3. The final report must include:
    a. An analysis of data studied, the findings, and recommendations.
    b. A plan for the restructuring of the participating school districts.
    c. A time line for the implementation of the plan.
    d. Plans for the establishment of an interim district board to oversee the implementation of the plan.

4. Upon approval of the preliminary plan for the restructuring of the participating school districts by a majority vote of the school board members and the state board of public school education, the superintendent of public instruction shall make available supplemental payments as provided in section 15-27.6-05.

Source: S.L. 1989, ch. 218, § 3.

15-27.6-02.1. Preliminary plan — One or more reorganized districts. The preliminary plan may contemplate the restructuring of the participating school districts into more than one reorganized district. However, each proposed reorganized district must meet the requirements of subdivision a of subsection 1 of section 15-27.6-11. If the preliminary plan contemplates the formation of more than one reorganized district, each proposed reorganized district shall form its own interim district board and shall proceed in accordance with this chapter.

Source: S.L. 1993, ch. 182, § 2.

Note.

The number of this section was assigned by the code revisor, the number of the section in section 2 of chapter 182, S.L. 1993 having been 15-27.6-02.5.

15-27.6-03. Interim district board. The interim district board is composed of at least one school board member appointed by the school board of each participating school district. Each representative must be a member of the school board of the school district of the appointing school board. The representative shall serve at the pleasure of the appointing school board and may be recalled by a majority vote of the appointing board. Each board member's term expires at the end of that member's term on the local school board. The board shall adopt bylaws for the conduct of its business and is governed, unless specifically provided otherwise, by the laws applicable to school districts.

Source: S.L. 1989, ch. 218, § 4.

15-27.6-04. Interim district board — Powers and duties. The interim district board shall:

1. Coordinate the programs and services according to the terms of the approved plan for school district restructuring.
2. Implement the plan for delivering education services.
3. Implement methods for sharing administrative and management services. For the purposes of this subdivision an administrator includes:
    a. Executive administrators, which include the superintendent and such assistants as deputy, associate, and assistant superintendents who perform activities with respect to the general direction and management of the affairs of the local school district.

  b. Business administrators, which includes personnel associated with activities concerned with purchasing, paying for, transporting, exchanging, and maintaining goods and services for the school district.

4. Develop a process for school districts or parts of school districts to join the projected restructured school district or withdraw from the projected restructured school district by annexing to another school district.
5. Develop procedures for a pupil who is a resident of a member district to enroll in programs or courses offered by another member district and the sharing of costs.
6. Establish methods for involving parents and other constituents of the participating school districts.
7. Review the plan annually and submit second-year and third-year plans to the state board for approval after the plans are adopted by the member school districts by a majority vote.
8. Submit an annual report to the participating school boards of the participating school districts at their annual meetings in July of each year and to the superintendent of public instruction on the same date.
9. Provide for the training of professional staff employed within the consortium in preparation for assuming positions in the reorganized district.

Source: S.L. 1989, ch. 218, § 5; 1991, ch. 170, §§ 3, 4; 1993, ch. 182, § 3.

15-27.6-05. State aid — Planning grants — Supplemental pupil payments.

1. Payments for approved planning grants must be made quarterly for a period not to exceed one year.
2. The interim district board of a consortium implemented during 1990 or 1991 is entitled to receive state aid in the amount of one hundred five dollars during each year of the 1993-95 biennium for each full-time equivalent student in average daily membership the previous year in the participating school districts. The superintendent of public instruction shall distribute the payments to the interim district boards in the same manner provided in section 15-40.1-05 for the distribution of payments to school districts. Prior to being entitled to the payment under this subsection, a participating school district must have one or more administrators jointly assigned and the participating districts' plan must be attempting to improve the quality of instruction as determined by the superintendent of public instruction.

Source: S.L. 1989, ch. 218, § 6; 1991, ch. 170, § 5; 1993, ch. 182, § 4; 1993, ch. 184, § 1.

Note.

Section 15-27.6-05 was amended twice by the 1993 Legislative Assembly in section 1 of chapter 184, S.L. 1993, and section 4 of chapter 182, S.L. 1993. Pursuant to section 1-02-09.1, the section is printed above as found in section 1 of chapter 184, S.L. 1993.

15-27.6-06. Assistance from superintendent of public instruction. The superintendent of public instruction may hire a state school district restructuring coordinator and assistants as may be necessary to assist school districts in the planning, organizing, and implementation of the plan to restructure school districts.

Source: S.L. 1989, ch. 218, § 7.

15-27.6-06.1. Formation of additional consortia.

1. While receiving supplemental payments pursuant to section 15-27.6-05, participating school districts may depart from the existing consortium, form another interim board, and proceed as a separate consortium, provided:
   a. The new consortium and the remaining consortium meet the requirements of subdivision a of subsection 1 of section 15-27.6-11;
   b. All the school districts participating in the original consortium continue to follow the annual plan in effect at the time the determination is made to form a separate consortium; and
   c. All the school boards participating in the original consortium agree to the separation.
2. For purposes of this chapter, a consortium that forms its own interim district board and separates from an original consortium is deemed to have formed at the time the interim board of the original consortium was formed.

Source: S.L. 1993, ch. 182, § 5.

Note.

The number of this section was assigned by the code revisor, the number of the section in section 5 of chapter 182, S.L. 1993 having been 15-27.6-06.5.

15-27.6-07. School district reorganization — Option to withdraw by annexing to another district — Hearing. The interim district board shall develop a proposal for the reorganization of the participating districts. The interim district board shall include all land located within the boundaries of the participating school districts in the reorganization proposal; provided, however, that a participating school district or part of a school district may be excluded from the reorganization proposal if the school district or part of the school district annexes to another school district. Any school district or part of a school district within the consortium may annex to another school district at any time. The interim district board shall hold a public hearing on the advisability of any proposal by the board for the reorganization of school districts. Notice of the hearing must be given by publishing a notice in the official county newspaper in each county affected by the proposed reorganization at least fourteen days prior to the date of any hearing. At the hearing, the interim district board shall make available to the public information about the value and amount of all school property and all bonded and other indebtedness of each school district involved in the proposed reorganization. At the hearing, the interim district board must make available to the public information regarding the curriculum offerings and staffing requirements to be implemented in the proposed reorganized school district. At the hearing, the board shall receive testimony offered by any person or school district interested in any reorganization proposal of the board. The testimony and documentary evidence considered by the board must include any information regarding the factors listed in subsections 1 through 15 of section 15-27.3-05. The board shall make specific findings with reference to each of the factors to which testimony or documentary evidence is directed in proceedings before the board. The board shall keep a record of all hearings on the reorganization of school districts and of all findings and terms of adjustment of property, debts, and liabilities among the districts involved and shall submit this information to the county committee at the time of submitting a proposal.

Source: S.L. 1991, ch. 170, § 6.

15-27.6-08. Determination and adjustment of property, assets, debts, and liabilities among districts — Determination of tax levy — Appeals. After the hearing, the interim district board shall determine the value and amount of all school property and all bonded and other indebtedness of each school district affected by the reorganization proposal and shall consider the amount of outstanding indebtedness and make an equitable adjustment of all property, assets, debts, and liabilities among the districts involved. The interim district board shall also determine the amount necessary to meet the expenses of the proposed reorganized district and shall propose a tax levy sufficient to meet those expenses. The interim district board shall submit the proposed tax levy to the county committee and the state board as part of the reorganization proposal, and if approved by the county committee and the state committee, the proposed tax levy must be included as part of the proposal and submitted to the electors of the proposed new district. Tax levies submitted as part of a reorganization proposal that is approved are not subject to mill levy limitations provided by law. Appeals on the question of adjustment of property, debts, and liabilities among the districts may be made as provided in section 15-27.3-07.

Source: S.L. 1991, ch. 170, § 7.

15-27.6-09. County committee review of proposal — Public meeting required — Submission of approved proposal to state board. After the hearing required by section 15-27.6-07, the interim district board shall make necessary changes to the proposal and submit the proposal to the county committee for its approval. The county committee shall review the proposal at a public meeting. The county committee shall publish in the county newspaper of any county affected by the reorganization proposal notice of the meeting at least fourteen days before the meeting. If a majority of the members of the county committee approve the proposal, the county committee shall submit the proposal to the state board for approval or disapproval. If the school districts involved in the reorganization proposal are situated in more than one county, a special committee composed of not fewer than three members of the county committee, selected by the committee, of the county encompassing the major portion of each school district shall review the proposal. The proposal must be submitted to each county committee for its approval. If the reorganization proposal is approved by a majority of the members of at least one-half of the county committees, or the members of one or more of the special committees fail or refuse to meet with the committee or committees from other counties, the county superintendent of the county in which the largest number of pupils who would be affected by the proposed new district reside shall submit the reorganization proposal to the state board for approval or disapproval. Approval of the reorganization proposal by the state board has the same effect as approval by all the county committees. If none of the county committees approves the reorganization proposal, it may not be presented to the state board for review. If the school districts are situated in more than one county but the major portions of those school districts are situated in the same county, the county committee of that county shall consider the matter.

Source: S.L. 1991, ch. 170, § 8.

15-27.6-10. Approved proposal received by county superintendent — Special election called — Formation of new district.

1. Upon receipt from the state board of an approved proposal for the reorganization of school districts, the county superintendent, after consulting with the interim district board, shall call a special election as provided in section 15-27.3-08.
2. If a majority of electors residing within each school district vote in favor of the formation of the new district, the county superintendent shall make the proper adjustments and perform all necessary duties as provided in subsection 5 of section 15-27.3-08.
3. If fewer than all of the districts vote in favor of a new district, any contiguous districts voting in favor of the proposal shall form a new district provided the state board approves and:

a. There are three districts, at least one of which offers grades one through twelve, they have a minimum combined enrollment of six hundred students, and they cover a minimum combined area of seven hundred square miles [181299.168 hectares]; or

b. There are four or more districts, at least one of which offers grades one through twelve, and they have a minimum combined enrollment of six hundred students or they cover a minimum combined area of seven hundred square miles [181299.168 hectares].

Any contiguous districts that vote in favor of forming a new district, but that do not meet the requirements of either subdivision a or b of this subsection, may form a new district. To form a new district, the board members of the interim district board who represent the contiguous districts involved shall make a determination and adjustment of property, assets, debts, and liabilities of the districts as provided in section 15-27.3-04 and make a determination of tax levy as provided in section 15-27.3-06, hold a hearing similar to the one described in section 15-27.6-07, and submit a new proposal to the state board for approval. No additional vote is required on the revised proposal, including a proposal that becomes effective on July 1, 1993. However, the newly proposed mill levy may not exceed the general fund mill levy limitations provided in section 57-15-14 plus the additional levy authorized by Senate Bill No. 2024, as approved by the fifty-third legislative assembly. For purposes of determining the amount that can be levied under Senate Bill No. 2024, the amount levied in dollars in the base year is the amount proposed to be levied in dollars by the new district in its first year of operation. If the state board approves the plan, the county superintendent shall make the proper adjustment of the property, assets, debts, and liabilities as provided in the proposal and organize and establish the districts and, in doing so, shall perform all other necessary duties as provided in subsection 5 of section 15-27.3-08.

4. a. If fewer than all of the districts vote in favor of a new district and the contiguous districts voting in favor do not meet the requirements of subdivision a or b of subsection 3, all or some of the districts may choose to vote again on the same or on a revised reorganization proposal, provided the districts meet the requirements of subdivision a or b of subsection 3.

b. If the reorganization proposal is revised, the interim district board members representing the districts choosing to vote again shall hold another hearing and make findings as outlined in section 15-27.6-07. The interim district board members shall keep a record of the hearing and shall submit the record and the revised proposal, along with any other relevant information, to the state board for approval. If the state board approves the revised reorganization proposal, the county superintendent shall proceed pursuant to subsection 1 of this section.

c. The second special election must be held within one year after the initial special election.

5. If a school district does not vote in favor of forming a new school district, any part of that school district excluded from the reorganization proposal pursuant to section 15-27.6-07 may either proceed with annexation or remain a part of that school district.

Source: S.L. 1991, ch. 170, § 9; 1993, ch. 3, § 16; 1993, ch. 179, § 3; 1993, ch. 182, § 6; 1993, ch. 184, § 2.

Note.

Section 15-27.6-10 was amended four times by the 1993 Legislative Assembly in section 16 of chapter 3, S.L. 1993, section 2 of chapter 184, S.L. 1993, section 3 of chapter 179, S.L. 1993, and section 6 of chapter 182, S.L. 1993. Pursuant to section 1-02-09.1, the section is printed above as found in section 16 of chapter 3, S.L. 1993, and section 2 of chapter 184, S.L. 1993, with the changes contained in section 3 of chapter 179, S.L. 1993.

15-27.6-11. Additional supplemental student payments. A newly formed district is eligible to receive the supplemental student payment of one hundred five dollars provided for in section 15-27.6-05 for one year following the effective date of the reorganization based on the number of full-time equivalent students in average daily membership during the year prior to the effective date of the reorganization if the newly formed district:

1. a. Meets the requirements of subdivision a or b of subsection 3 of section 15-27.6-10; or consists of three districts, at least one of which offers grades one through twelve, and has a minimum combined enrollment of six hundred students or covers a minimum combined area of seven hundred square miles [181299.168 hectares], and obtains approval of the state board; and
   b. Has adopted a policy that allows a student residing in the district to attend any school in the district; or
2. Received approval for a planning grant prior to July 17, 1991.

Source: S.L. 1991, ch. 170, § 10; 1993, ch. 182, § 7; 1993, ch. 184, § 3.

Note.

Section 15-27.6-11 was amended twice by the 1993 Legislative Assembly. Pursuant to section 1-02-09.1, the section is printed above to harmonize and give effect to the changes made in section 3 of chapter 184, S.L. 1993, and section 7 of chapter 182, S.L. 1993.

15-27.6-12. Application of sections. Sections 15-27.3-12 through 15-27.3-15 and sections 15-27.3-17 through 15-27.3-21 apply to school district reorganizations under this chapter.

Source: S.L. 1993, ch. 182, § 8.

15-27.6-13. Definitions. As used in this section and section 15-27.6-14:

1. "Continuous service" means uninterrupted employment in a school district involved in a reorganization and includes leaves of absence, statutory leaves, military leaves, medical leaves of absence, and leaves for educational enhancement purposes.
2. "First preference" means priority and entitlement to employment, unless the school district by clear and convincing evidence shows a compelling reason why a teacher should not be so employed.
3. "Open teaching positions" means a full-time or part-time teaching position that is not filled by a certificated teacher and which is or will be maintained during any school year within the term of the teacher's recall rights.
4. "Qualified by certification" means a teacher is qualified pursuant to the laws of this state and the rules of the superintendent of public instruction to serve as a teacher in a particular class or subject area.

Source: S.L. 1993, ch. 183, § 1.

15-27.6-14. Recall rights — Consortia — Teacher contracts not renewed.

1. When the contract of a teacher employed by a school district involved in reorganization pursuant to chapter 15-27.6 is not renewed under the provisions of subsection 5 of section 15-47-38 because of a reduction in force, the teacher is entitled to first preference for any open teaching positions in the reorganized school district for which the teacher is qualified by certification. The right of recall continues until July first of the year that is two years subsequent to the date of the nonrenewal. Among teachers who have recall rights and who are qualified by certification, the teacher with the longest continuous service within a school district involved in the reorganization is entitled to first preference. In the event that teachers entitled to recall under this section have equal continuous service within a district involved in the reorganization, then the academic preparation beyond a bachelor's degree must be used to determine which teacher is entitled to first preference under this section.
2. The teacher may exercise rights under this section by providing the reorganized school district with a written demand for recall rights within thirty days of the current school district's written notice of nonrenewal. The teacher shall inform the reorganized school district of any changes in the teacher's address during the period of the teacher's recall rights. When an open position exists within the reorganized school district, the reorganized school district shall send written notice of the open position, including details of the position's requirements to all teachers who are qualified for the position by certification. A written notice must contain, in descending order of

preference, the names of teachers entitled to recall rights. Any teacher who fails to accept recall rights in writing, within fourteen days after the teacher has received a letter by certified mail, is deemed to have waived recall rights against that position. The open position must be offered to the teacher who is entitled to preference under this section and who has accepted recall rights for the open position.

3. The recall rights of any teacher who accepts less than full-time employment in a reorganized school district continue for the time period contained in subsection 1 for consideration to fill any open position that offers compensation in excess of the teacher's compensation for less than full-time employment.

Source: S.L. 1993, ch. 183, § 2.

CHAPTER 15-27.7

SCHOOL DISTRICT COOPERATIVE ARRANGEMENT

Section

15-27.7-01. School district cooperative arrangements — Rules.
15-27.7-02. Pairing — Eligibility — Report.
15-27.7-03. Cooperative arrangements — Supplemental payments.

15-27.7-01. School district cooperative arrangements — Rules. The superintendent of public instruction, with assistance from the state board of public school education, shall adopt rules for the purpose of administering supplemental payments to a purchaser school district which enters into a cooperative arrangement with a provider school district for the purpose of purchasing educational services. Any school district enrolling at least one thousand students in grades kindergarten through twelve is defined as a "provider district". Any school district enrolling five hundred ninety-nine students or fewer in grades kindergarten through twelve is defined as a "purchaser district". A school district enrolling at least six hundred and fewer than one thousand students in grades kindergarten through twelve has the option of being a provider district or a purchaser district under this section. In paired relationships under this provision, purchaser districts that are contiguous to provider districts and therefore eligible to reorganize with or annex to the provider district shall commit to a vote on reorganization or annexation to the provider district no later than the end of the third year in order to receive full payment. The superintendent of public instruction, if requested, shall provide assistance to school districts in the development and implementation of a plan to enter into a cooperative arrangement to purchase educational services.

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